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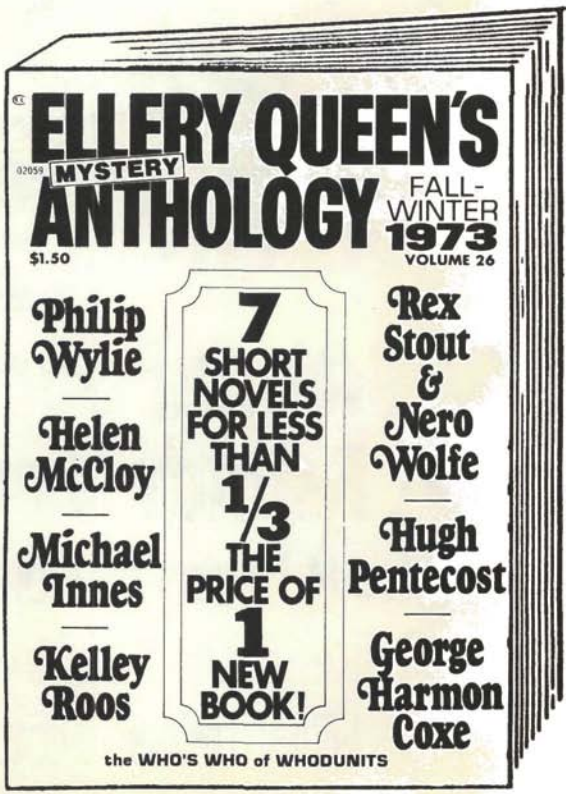

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World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
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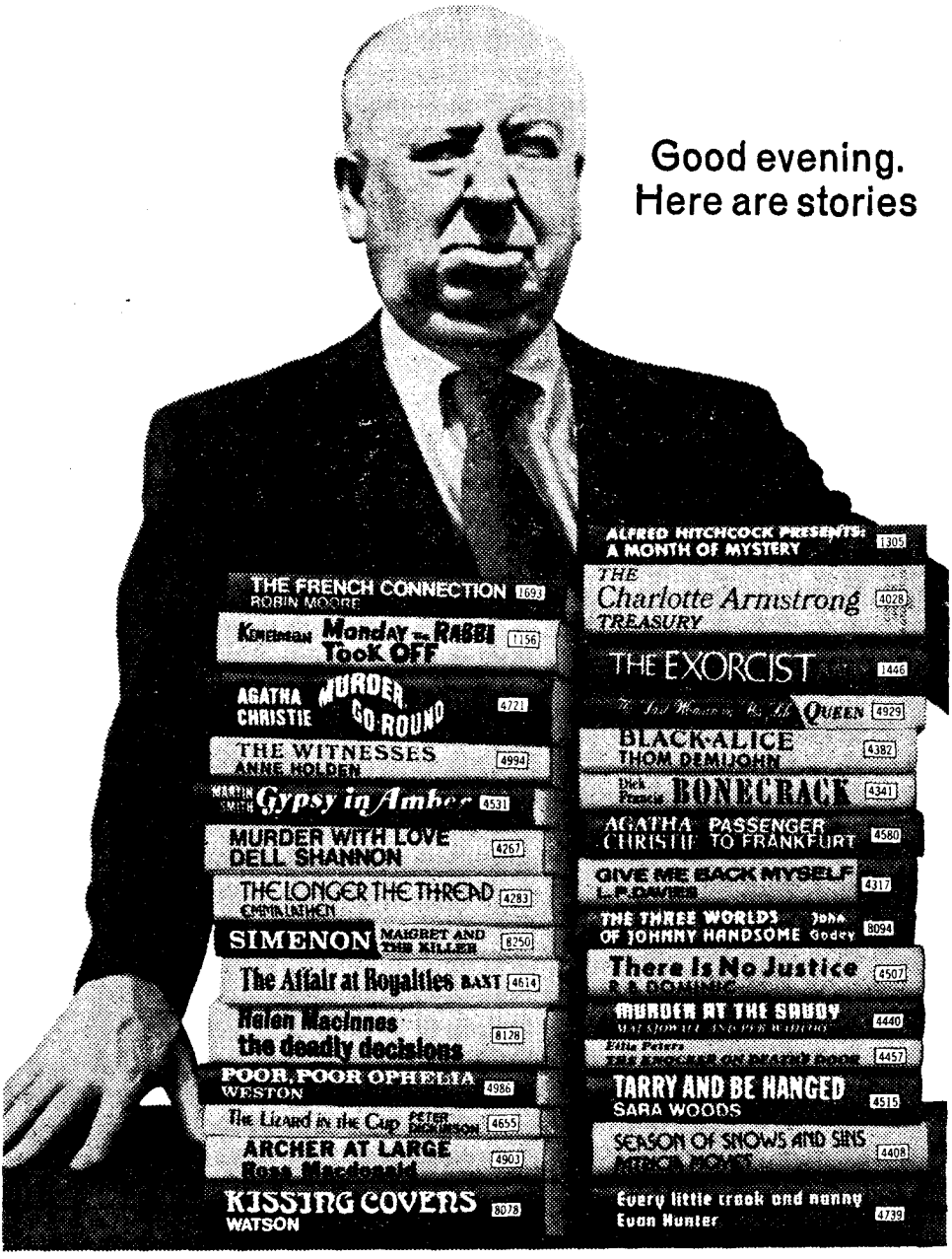

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THE CORRUPTION OF OFFICER AVAKADIAN

by STANLEY ELLIN

In regard to this heated issue of police corruption, I take the position—

No.

What with one thing and another, I believe it would be best to simply describe the curious event which led me to the position I take. And to start with the call received by Officer Schultz and me in our patrol car that night some time ago—I can measure the time by reflecting that two cherubic

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daughters have since been added to my roster of four sturdy sons, the Avakadians always having been a precocious and prolific breed—because that dispatcher's message was, I now see, the opening curtain on the event.

The call came at one A.M. abruptly breaking the bleak silence in the car. That silence, as we cruised along, was entirely Schultz's doing. I had been expostulating on various aspects of our profession—informatively, I knew; brightly, I hoped—until Schultz said, "Will you kindly shut up, Avakadian?" after which I kept my thoughts entirely to myself.

I suppose that the kindest way to put it was that Schultz was not dedicated to his job. I had graduated with highest honors from Police School, having spent my months there among highly motivated and dedicated men. I had served my probationary period as foot patrolman among several young officers who also demonstrated this spirit. Now, for the first time, I was encountering an entirely different kind of police officer. Indeed, after only three days as Schultz's partner in police patrol car Number 8, I had begun to wonder whether I had been placed in his company to glean the lessons an experienced old hand could provide or whether he had been placed in my company so that a bit of my own keen spit-and-polish attitude, my devotion to the departmental rule book, might not rub off on him.

In that latter case, it was time wasted. Schultz was only a few months from retirement, a bloated old time-server who seemed to make up his own rules as he went along. He was slovenly of person—his uniform jacket always appeared to be buttoned at the wrong buttons—and, worse than that, he was slovenly in manner and attitude, always more willing to expend his scant energies in crawling through loopholes in the rule book than in carrying them out to the letter.

Despite his uncongenial manner toward me, I believe he did have a grudging respect for what I represented. This surfaced briefly when, during our first tour of duty together, he suddenly asked me—and there was genuine wonderment in his tones—"Were you always like this, Avakadian?" To which, in honest response, I explained that in my youth I had been the youngest Eagle Scout in the history of my troop and that before I set my course by the departmental rule book, I had steered it by nothing else than the Boy Scout Handbook. I even recited for him from

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memory the Scout Laws on being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent, to which he only said in quick retreat to his curmudgeon role, "And how did friendly get in there?"

That stung me a little, though I well understood the reasons for it. As for example, any snacks we had during our tour of duty Schultz apparently regarded as gifts from the proprietors of the hamburger stands we stopped at, but I had insisted we pay in full for them, even though this procedure seemed to bewilder and alarm those proprietors. And twice, when we had caught up with traffic violators who were as transparently eager to buy their way out of trouble as Schultz was to take their money, my stern insistence on writing out the ticket made any such transaction impossible.

So in answer to his gibe, all I said was, "Remember, Schultz, friendliness does not mean condoning moral laxity." He had no answer to that, of course.

But, not to digress, that night in question we were cruising along sharing a bleak silence when the dispatcher's voice was heard. "Car eight. Householder at 77 Pineview, northwest," to which Schultz responded, as was his wont, "Yeah, sure," so that I, as I was invariably forced to do, had to take the speaker from Schultz's hand before he could hang it up and crisply reply to the dispatcher, "Ten-four," the only proper response.

I then remarked to Schultz —and it was not the first time I had been forced to do so—that since we were now on call, both the flasher and the siren had to be put into operation.

"Why?" Schultz said. "Why, Avakadian? Take a look. There isn't any traffic. Why do we have to make a circus of every call?"

"Because, Schultz, the rules prescribe it. And if you want the number of the exact rule—"

"Forget it," Schultz snarled, but willy-nilly he did turn on flasher and siren.

The northwest district was and is an area of luxurious homes, each surrounded by beautifully tended lawns. The door of Number 77 was already ajar as Schultz and I approached it along a flagstoned path, and when we reached the door I saw on the wall beside it a brass plaque inscribed *Cyrus Cahoon, M.D.* No surprise, that, since many of the finest properties in these parts were owned by members of the medical profession.

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The tall aristocratic woman in robe and slippers who stood in the doorway motioned us inside the house. There, on one side of the foyer we entered, open doors revealed a waiting room and medical examining room. On the other side was a living room where a man dressed in a rather rumpled suit stood regarding us from beneath lowering brows. The woman pointed at him and said, "This is my husband, Dr. Cyrus Cahoon. He wishes to report an atrocious crime."

"I wish to report nothing, Florence," said Dr. Cahoon. "You were the one who invited these men here. Now do me the favor of inviting them out."

"Yeah, sure," Schultz said, and was already preparing to depart when Mrs. Cahoon grasped his arm firmly. "Officer," she said, "my husband may choose to stand mute, but if kidnaping is a crime, I cannot."

"It's a crime," Schultz said uncomfortably, and I must admit I felt an excitement at what I was hearing. My third day on this detail, and here I was confronted by one of the most heinous and dramatic of all felonies. I could only regret that I was not yet in detective grade where the task of handling the case would be mine. It was incredible that Schultz should manage to remain so stolid as he put the question, "Who's been kidnaped?"

Mrs. Cahoon again leveled a forefinger at her husband. "He was."

"He looks all right to me," Schultz said.

"I am all right," Dr. Cahoon said.

Schultz tried to detach his arm from Mrs. Cahoon's grip. He said, "Lady, if you and your husband would settle it between yourselves and then let us know how it came out—"

Mrs. Cahoon hung onto his arm. "It has been settled. My husband was kidnaped by a gang of criminals, do you hear? And he cannot deny it."

Plainly, Schultz wanted nothing more than to make a quick exit. Even more plainly, leaving now would be gross neglect of duty. At the very least, information on the crime had to be entered into our notebooks; the detective squad would have to be informed. So, although I had been advised by the department to follow Schultz's lead in all calls, I saw that, so to speak, I must now take the bit between my teeth.

I pulled out my notebook and pencil. I said to Dr. Cahoon, "Sir, what is the problem here? Are you afraid of reprisals if you take proper

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action against your alleged kidnapers?"

Dr. Cahoon regarded me steadily for a few moments. Then he looked at Schultz. "Is he for real?" he asked.

Happily, Mrs. Cahoon recognized the authority in my tone. She released Schultz's arm and turned to me. "I want you to write all this down," she said.

I held up my notebook and pencil to indicate that I was more than ready to do my duty.

"Oh, hell," Dr. Cahoon said.

"Officer," Mrs. Cahoon said, "an hour ago, I woke from a sound sleep wondering why it was suddenly so light in the bedroom. Then I saw this woman standing there with a gun pointed at me. Then I saw another woman on the other side of the bed pointing a gun at my husband, and a man getting some of my husband's clothing from the closet. It was horrible. It was like a bad dream."

"I have survived the experience," Dr. Cahoon said.

Mrs. Cahoon disregarded this. "The man told my husband to put on his suit over his pajamas. My husband will not admit it but he was very much shaken. He offered the man all the money we had in the house, and the man said, 'No. We want you.' "

"Three of them," I said. "Can you describe them?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Cahoon. "The women wore house dresses. The one pointing the gun at me was short and stout. At least a size eighteen. She had curlers in her hair. Large pink plastic rollers. The other woman could have been a size twelve. She had gray hair done in a very unattractive permanent. The man was gray-haired, too. Medium height, medium weight, totally undistinguished in appearance. Then two of them removed my husband from the room—"

"I removed myself from the room," Dr. Cahoon said. "I left under my own power, putting one foot ahead of the other in the customary fashion."

"With a gun at your head," Mrs. Cahoon pointed out.

"That I cannot deny."

"And where were you taken?" I asked.

"Downstairs to my examining room."

"And then?" I said encouragingly.

"Then I was asked to produce my medical bag, which I did, and to submit to having my eyes blindfolded by a length of bandage. And since there seems to be no way of turning off your tape, officer, I will tell you that I was then conducted to a car and driven for about

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ten or fifteen minutes to some location where I was led indoors. When the blindfold was removed I saw that I was in a rather poorly furnished bedroom. A young man was in bed there apparently suffering acute pain, and a young woman whom I took to be his wife was also there, hysterically sympathizing with him."

Inspiration struck me. I said, "That young man was suffering a gunshot or knife wound, wasn't he? And you were expected to treat him without informing the authorities."

"The young man," Dr. Cahoon said, "was suffering what in layman's language is called a sprained ankle, although it was his impression, and his wife's, that the ankle was broken. After diagnosing the condition, I gave him a sedative, bound the ankle properly, advised bed rest. By now I imagine he is sound asleep, his pain eased."

"Well, mine isn't," Mrs. Cahoon said sharply. "After what I went through when they hauled you away—"

"Yes?" I prompted.

"That horrible little fat woman stayed right here with me all that time. She planked herself down on the chair next to my bed and kept that gun pointed at me. She said to me, 'Just keep cool, sister,' and in the most threatening way."

"That's all she said?" I asked. "Nothing about what her accomplices were up to?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Cahoon. "Later on she did ask me about my bedroom drapes."

"Your bedroom drapes?"

"Yes. She asked how much they cost, and when I told her she said in a very sneering manner, 'They really took you, didn't they?' But every time I asked about my husband she just stared at me with those beady little eyes and wouldn't say a word."

Schultz stirred himself. He said to Dr. Cahoon, "But they brought you back okay, didn't they?"

"Yes," Dr. Cahoon said. "They also paid me." He dug into a pocket and held up a twenty-dollar bill to our view. "The wife, or whoever she was, gave it to me before I was blindfolded again and led away. She said, 'That should take care of it, Doc,' and since I was in no position to negotiate at length, I said yes, it did."

Schultz drew a long slow breath as if to fill his lungs for an ordeal ahead. He pointed at a chair. "Can I sit down?" he said.

"My home is your home," Dr. Cahoon said.

Schultz sat down and stretched out his legs. I was

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dismayed to see that this glaringly exposed to all his scuffed shoes and bedraggled socks. He said to Dr. Cahoon, "You don't make house calls, do you?"

"I used to," the doctor said. "But you understand that my practice now—"

"Yeah, sure," Schultz said, and then remarked complainingly, "When I was a kid, doctors made house calls. Even this time of night."

"And what," demanded Mrs. Cahoon, justifiably angry, "does that have to do with the crime committed against us?"

Schultz made no effort to answer this unanswerable question. Instead, he said to Dr. Cahoon, "You know there's been other cases like this lately? Other doctors being snatched?"

From Mrs. Cahoon's expression I saw that she was as astonished by this as I was. I was even more astonished to hear Dr. Cahoon say, "Yes. So some of my colleagues have been saying."

"What!" Mrs. Cahoon said explosively. "And not a word of it getting out? I don't believe it!"

"Lady, you can believe it," Schultz advised. "As for no word getting out, I guess all those other doctors got hit this way feel like your husband does about it. They'd kind of like to keep it strictly in the family."

"Do you hear that, Florence?" Dr. Cahoon said. He said to Schultz, "I tried to explain this to her. Maybe you'll have better luck at it than I did."

"Yeah, sure," Schultz said. He shook his head reproachfully at Mrs. Cahoon. "You see, lady, if we turn in a report on this, tomorrow you won't be able to walk out of your door what with all the reporters and TV guys there. And all of them looking to play it for comedy."

"Comedy?" Mrs. Cahoon said. "A crime like this?"

"Well, nobody got hurt, did they? And doc here got paid for the job, just like all the others did. Now what do you make of a kidnaping where it's the victim that gets paid off? And let's face it, lady, the public will not be with you. Same goes for any jury that gets this case. Push the wrong button right now, and next thing you'll be a coast-to-coast joke."

Plainly, Mrs. Cahoon was hard hit by this. She stared at Schultz, her mouth opening and closing in a rather fishlike way. At last she found her voice. "Incredible," she said weakly.

"A coast-to-coast joke, Florence," Dr. Cahoon said. "Yes, indeed, the whole medical profession will have much to thank you for."

"Incredible," Mrs. Cahoon

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said again. She grasped the back of a chair and managed to seat herself. Her eyes remained glassily fixed on a far wall of the room. "Incredible."

Dr. Cahoon said to Schultz, "I think you have made your point, officer. Thank you for that. Now if you gentlemen would like a drink before you leave—"

"Well—" Schultz said, hauling himself out of his chair, then he glanced my way. "No, not while we're on duty."

One does not enter into a confrontation with a fellow officer before the public. I maintained a tight-lipped silence until we were seated in the patrol car. I made an effort to keep my voice level. "Schultz," I said, "are you aware that a felony must be placed on record, however the complainant may feel about it?"

"Yeah, sure. So we'll put this down as a prowler who took off when we came around."

"You may do that, Schultz. I, however, am going to enter a detailed report on everything I have just seen and heard, including the unpleasant fact that a kidnap ring is being allowed to operate with impunity right under the department's nose."

"Yeah," Schultz said. "Well, you're way off base, Avakadian."

"If you are suggesting that the exposure of a crime wave—"

"I already exposed it, Avakadian. Unofficial like. On my own, see? I figured out after the first few snatches that it had to be that phone-answering service all these doctors use that was behind it. It was the one thing tied in with all of them. And that's what it was. Some nice old lady on the night switchboard there got so upset by doctors turning down house calls that she got some friends of hers to do something about it. That way, at least, they can take care of anybody they know personally and can count on not to spill the beans. And the guns are toy guns."

"Schultz, hasn't it entered your mind that your nice old lady is guilty of at least a dozen felonies?"

"I know. But if everybody wants it hushed up, why make trouble? And I'll let you in on something good, Avakadian, if you forget the book for once. I got a deal with that old lady, so any time me or the family needs a doctor she sees to it one shows up quick. Say the word, and she'll sign you on with the rest of the department."

"Do you mean that the whole department is in on this?"

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"Sure. They're practically all family men, ain't they? Look at you, Avakadian, with a wife and four kids. How many times did you get turned down so far when you wanted a doctor to come fix one of them up?"

My mind was whirling, part of it doing painful arithmetic in answer to that question, part of it recoiling in horror from the proposition being coldbloodedly offered me. But the arithmetic seemed to be submerging all other thoughts.

"Schultz," I said at last, "do you absolutely guarantee that those were only toy guns?"

"Absolutely," said Schultz.

And now, looking back, I must say that things have worked out very well, especially during influenza epidemics.

Which is why I take the position in regard to police corruption that one must not be too inflexible. Let us face one indisputable fact. The rule book serves well in most cases, but it does not bring healing.

"Q"

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GREEN INK

by WILLIAM MILLER

Sebastian Sampson liked his name. It was strong and solid. It sounded impressive when spoken and looked positively formidable when written, especially if he made large sweeping S's, or underscored the signature with bold strokes, or tailed it off with a string of exclamation points.

Sebastian Sampson liked his name because he liked himself. And why shouldn't he? At 55 he looked upon himself as a splendid example of the self-made man—a little paunchy, perhaps, but well dressed in a conservative style, as befitted the president of the Merchants City Bank.

He took great pride in having reached the top of his profession.

"After all," he once told his first vice-president, "it's not every man who starts as a teller and ends up as president. I've trodden on a few toes to get here, but now I'm here and here I stay."

He ended his brief boastful confession with another extravagant Sampsonian signature on *The Wall Street Journal.*

That evening, as he waited at the station for the commuter train, Sampson felt especially pleased with himself. He had just directed the bank into another lucrative investment that would pay handsome dividends and further consolidate his standing with the stockholders.

Perhaps he should celebrate by going to the theater, he thought, as his eyes rested on a theater poster. It was a brilliant poster with dancing figures.

And then Sampson felt that irresistible urge again—the urge to write his name. To write his name outdoors would be the crowning touch to another successful day.

Sampson glanced to right and left. The other commuters stood with heads buried in their newspapers. Sampson flipped out his pen and in a flourishing hand wrote his signature on the top white margin of the poster. The next moment the train arrived at the station and the buoyant Sampson jostled his way to a seat by the window.

He pressed his face close to the glass, smirking as his eye fastened on the black-inked signature that shrunk as the train

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pulled away from the station.

The following evening Sampson went back to the poster to take a little sly satisfaction in gazing on his handiwork. His smile faded into a look of stunned disbelief.

Beneath his signature someone had added in bright green ink the words: *is an idiot.*

Sampson glowered at the impudent postscript. Who the . . .? His mental splutterings were cut short by the arrival of his train.

The next evening Sampson almost tripped in his haste to inspect the poster. A second green-ink comment greeted him.

His brow furrowed in anger as he read the full inscription: *Sebastian Sampson is an idiot and a pompous oaf.*

Snatching out his pen, Sampson fired back with: *And you are a childish scribbler.*

Obsessed now with the exchanges on the poster, Sampson rushed back the next day to find that Green Ink had replied: *Anyone who goes around writing his own name on posters must be a megalomaniac.*

Sampson boiled as he wrote: *At least I'm not a coward. Identify yourself and I'll punch you in the nose.*

When Sampson got back to the poster the next evening he found his challenge accepted. *You're on,* Green Ink had replied. *The address is 1873 East 110th Street. Third floor. Second door on the right. Be there at nine tonight.*

The next day the newspapers carried the following story:

"Veteran police officers were scratching their heads today over the antics of a city banker who met his death last night in an abandoned tenement at 1873 E. 110th St.

"Dead is 55-year-old Sebastian Sampson, president of the Merchants City Bank, who, according to a passerby, ran into the building shortly before nine o'clock last night.

"From a police reconstruction of the incident, it appears the bank president raced up the stairs to the third floor, entered an apartment door, and fell three stories to his death.

"Puzzled police said they have no clue to explain why the banker was in a building already in the process of being demolished in a city wrecking project."

Three mornings later, on the day Sebastian Sampson was to be buried, the man sitting at Sampson's desk said, "How thoughtless of me—I forgot to send a condolence card."

And the first vice-president, who was now the president of the Merchants City Bank, refilled his pen with green ink.

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One of the nastiest crimes in the calendar of crime is the sending of an anonymous letter deliberately calculated to do mischief—or worse. Few happenings made Inspector Petrella lose his cool, but an epidemic of anonymous letters—an epidemic of them!—turned him into a wrathful avenger . . .

THE DEATH OF MRS. KEY

by MICHAEL GILBERT

The anonymous letter, written in capitals on a sheet of plain white paper, said, "How much did Fred Barron pay you to perjure yourself? I expect Scotland Yard would like to know. So I'm going to tell them. Not now. Probably next week. Think about it."

"When did you get this?" Petrella asked.

"This morning," said Constable Owers. He looked half amused, half angry. "I kept the envelope. I thought you'd want it."

The envelope was a large yellow one, and Constable Owers' name and address were neatly typed on it.

"Whoever sent it," said Petrella, "can't have known a lot about police procedure."

Fred Barron had long been under suspicion of being a receiver of stolen goods, and this was the charge that the police would dearly have liked to pin on him. The Director of Public Prosecutions had studied the available evidence, and had advised against it. A summons under the Shops Act, which they could make stick, had been substituted. Constable Owers had been the main police witness, but the decision on which charge to prefer had been nothing to do with him.

"I wasn't worried," said

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Owers, "but I thought you ought to see it. I heard a buzz quite a lot of people have been getting billy-doos like this."

"I heard the same," said Petrella. "I did wonder if Mrs. Key might have been getting them."

This was on Saturday. Mrs. Key had died on Thursday. She was a frail lady, in her middle sixties, crippled with arthritis. Sometime during the evening, after her companion and helper, Mrs. Oldenshaw, had departed and she was quite alone, she had wheeled herself, in her invalid chair, into the kitchen, had shut the windows and door and blocked up the gap under the door with a roller towel, and had turned on all the taps on her gas cooker.

Neighbors coming back late that night had smelled the gas and called the police.

"What makes 'em do it?" said Owers. "Send letters like that, I mean. That last bit, about waiting before reporting me. It was meant to make me sweat, wasn't it?"

"One part badness and three parts madness. If everyone was as sensible as you and brought them straight along to us, we might have a chance of catching them. I wonder how many people have had them and kept quiet."

An unexpected answer to this question was in the offing.

Sunday was not a guaranteed day of rest for a C.I.D. officer, but when the exigencies of his job allowed, Petrella liked to go to Matins or Evensong at St. Marks, which was the parish church of Riverside South. He enjoyed hearing the rector. The Reverend Patrick Amberline had been many things before, late in life, he had come to the Church. He was a man who was large in every dimension of body and mind.

On this particular Sunday evening, having heaved himself up into the pulpit like an elderly circus elephant mounting a tub, he opened the proceedings by saying, "I have some news for you. I am"—he consulted a paper which he had in his hand—"a lecherous beast and a seducer of young girls. In fact, a thoroughly dirty old man." After a moment of stunned silence the church rocked with laughter.

When order had been restored, the rector said, "It's really no laughing matter. I propose to pin this remarkable communication onto the notice board in the porch so that you may see it for yourselves. The bit about making improper advances to the ladies in the choir, you'll have to take with a pinch of salt. I'm too fat to make advances, and they're

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much too sensible to receive them. However, my object in mentioning this"—he paused and looked round the congregation—"was a serious one. If any of you have received these products of a sick mind, don't hide them. The answer to corruption is fresh air. Show them to everyone. Above all, show them to the police. And now, to my text for today—"

During the sermon Petrella cast an eye over the young ladies of the choir and wondered which of them the anonymous letter writer had had in mind. Two rather severe ones, with glasses. Two flashy blondes. Two or three who were obviously schoolgirls. One redhead, a bit older than the others, and more self-possessed; she looked the most plausible candidate.

Coming out of church, and noticing the chattering groups that had gathered at the door, Petrella came to the conclusion that Father Amberline had done the preliminary part of the police work more effectively than they could possibly have done it themselves.

The results started to come into Patton Street Police Station at an early hour on Monday. Petrella left the scholarly Sergeant Ambrose to deal with them and walked around to Mrs. Key's little terrace house in Smarden Lane.

He found two people there. He had met Mrs. Oldenshaw before. She was a woman designed by nature to be a companion, being negative in character and accommodating in disposition. The young man with her wore large round spectacles which made him look like an owl. He turned out to be Ronald Blanshard, Mrs. Key's nephew.

Petrella said, "I don't want to bother you with a lot of questions at a time like this, but we've got the inquest on Wednesday and there are one or two points we must clear up."

The owl-like young man blinked at him and Mrs. Oldenshaw said, "I can't hardly bring myself to speak of it. She was driven to it, poor soul, that I do know."

Petrella said, "That's what I was wondering about. She didn't leave any note behind her, but it did occur to me—"

He let the sentence hang. Mrs. Oldenshaw looked at the young man, who stared sadly back at her.

"If there was anything," said Petrella gently, "we must be told."

"It was all so beastly," said Ronald. "I've seen some of the letters—the ones she kept. Mrs. Oldenshaw just showed them to me. They accused her"—he

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seemed to have difficulty in getting the words out—"of killing both her brothers and her husband."

Petrella stared at him.

"They were all killed in action. Her older brother, my uncle Edward, on the Somme in the first war. Her younger brother George—he was my father—was killed in Germany in 1945." The young man paused, blinked in a very owl-like way, and added, "I can't remember him at all. To me he's just a photograph and some relics my mother keeps in a drawer at home."

Petrella said, "And her husband?"

"He was in the R.A.F. He was shot down on a bomber raid."

"But how could she possibly be blamed—"

"Read them for yourself," said Ronald.

They were detailed, ingenious, and horrible masterpieces of innuendo and spite. And they all said the same thing. "You drove your menfolk to the war. They didn't really want to go. You talked them into it. While you sat safely at home, they were torn to pieces by shrapnel, burst apart by high explosive, burned. Think of your husband, trapped in that bomber, roasting to death as it went down into the sea. Are you satisfied with the results? You've got all the family money now, you selfish barren bitch."

"Why on earth did she keep them?" said Petrella. "Why did she ever open them at all?"

"That was the devilish part of it," said Ronald. "They all came in different shapes and sizes of envelopes, with different kinds of typing on them. She couldn't avoid seeing them. Unless she refused to open any letters at all."

"There were telephone calls, too," said Mrs. Oldenshaw. "When she was alone here, in the evening. Whispering things to her."

Petrella swung round abruptly. He said, "I'll take all these letters. I see she kept some of the envelopes. I'll take them as well."

Back at Patton Street he found Sergeant Ambrose with a heap of papers on the table in front of him.

"Eighty-five to date," he said, "and more coming in. All handwritten in block capitals. All the envelopes typed."

Petrella said, "I want them analyzed. By recipients, by the subject matter of the threats, by dates, by postmarks, and by typewriters. Get all the envelopes up to Central. They've a man there who can tell you the make of machine from a line of

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typescript. I want the answers as quickly as possible."

He walked out of the room as abruptly as he had come into it. Sergeant Ambrose stared after him. He had never seen Petrella angry before. However, it was the sort of job he enjoyed and he set to work quickly and neatly.

Petrella made a telephone call to Central to make sure that the expert he wanted would be available and then paid a visit to the offices of Messrs. Mellors and Rapp, Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths, who had an office in the High Street. They were the largest firm in Riverside South. They did most of the police-court work in that area, appearing sometimes for the police and sometimes for the defense, in the impartial way which is so puzzling to foreigners brought up on a system of state prosecution.

The senior partner, Mr. Charles Rapp, was tall and thin. He knew Petrella and received him without delay in his private room, a center point of calm in a maelstrom of clacking typewriters, buzzing telephones, and hurrying clerks.

"There's no reason you shouldn't know about it," he said when he had grasped what Petrella wanted. "As soon as we can get probate, a will becomes public property. Mrs. Key's will was very simple. She left a sum of £40,000 to her nephew and only surviving relative, Ronald Blanshard, provided he survives her by one full month. That's put in to avoid double death duties. Anything left over after payment of debts and duties and of this legacy to her nephew is to be invested in an annuity for her companion, Mrs. Oldenshaw."

"Will there be anything left?"

"Oh, yes. I should think so. Possibly as much as ten thousand pounds. It should provide a comfortable little annuity."

Petrella phrased his next questions cautiously. He knew that he was treading on delicate ground. He said, "Have you ever met Ronald?"

"He did come in here about a year ago, I think. To make his own will. He's an architect, I believe. He seemed a very nice young man." Mr. Rapp cocked a tufted eyebrow at Petrella.

"Oh, very," said Petrella. "I happened to run across him when I went round to the house. Do you know if he's married?"

"I fancy not. But I believe he told me he was engaged. I seem to remember warning him that when he got married it would invalidate his will, and he

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would have to make another one."

Petrella thanked Mr. Rapp and took off. On the way out he thought he saw a head of hair which he recognized, bent over one of half a dozen typewriters in the general office. The typist looked up, and the impression was confirmed. It was the readheaded young lady from the choir of St. Marks.

Petrella walked back slowly to Patton Street. A picture was shaping itself in his mind. It was blurred and indistinct as yet, like a photograph taken out of focus. And it was not a pleasant picture.

Sergeant Ambrose had his first report ready. It covered ten foolscap pages of careful handwriting, and divided and subdivided the anonymous letters into every possible category, and carefully analyzed each. Petrella took it home with him that evening and read it over his supper. His wife observed the bleak look on his face and refrained from asking any questions.

On the following afternoon the report on the typewriters came in from Scotland Yard. Six different machines, it said. Two newish Lexingtons. One older and one very old Remington. One Italian Pulchrion. And one German Obermark. The report added, "None of the typefaces is perfect. If a sample could be obtained from a suspected machine, a positive identification should be made available."

Petrella considered this, and gave Constable Owers certain instructions.

The last members of the staff of Messrs. Mellors and Rapp were usually away by six, and for the next hour the offices were in the hands of the cleaners. At 6:45 that evening Mrs. Burgess, who was dusting round young Mr. Mellors' room, was disturbed by a loud ringing of the front doorbell. She hurried to the door and found two policemen on the step.

The older one said, "I don't wish to alarm you, ma'am, or the other young ladies, but we've had a report that a person was seen climbing into these premises by a back window."

Mrs. Burgess said, "Oh, lor, what will they get up to next?"

"There's no cause to be alarmed," said Constable Owers. "If the intruder is still on the premises we can deal with him. But I think you ought to take these two young ladies to a place of safety."

The two young ladies, who were Mrs. Burgess' daughters, nodded vigorous agreement.

"It won't take us long to

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search the building. Suppose you walk across the street and have a nice cup of tea?"

This proposal was accepted with gratitude.

As soon as the ladies were gone, Owers said to his younger companion, Constable Brean, "Watch the door, Albert, and tell me if they show any signs of coming back."

He disappeared into the general office, selected six sheets of paper from the drawer of one of the desks, and set to work. He was by no means an expert typist, and it took him nearly ten minutes to type out, in upper and lower case, on each of six machines, "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog," followed by, "12 x £3456—78 = 90% ? !"

When he had finished he replaced the typewriter covers and went out to reassure Mrs. Burgess and her daughters.

That same evening Petrella called on Father Amberline, who knew more about the lives, characters, and intentions of his flock than most parish priests, and told him what he suspected. He said, "You know the person concerned better than I do. Do you think that person *could* have done it?"

"Before answering that," said Father Amberline, "I'd need to be convinced that it was done at all."

"I think I can convince you," said Petrella.

When he had finished, the priest said, "There are certain people of whom I could have said, with certainty, it is impossible. With this person I am far from sure. There is a streak of hardness. If the money was sufficient, this person might have done it."

On Wednesday a coroner's jury returned a verdict on Mrs. Key of "suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed," and Ronald Blanshard was given authority to arrange for her cremation.

On Thursday morning Petrella saw Superintendent Watterson.

Petrella said, "It's about these anonymous letters. I know now who's been sending them."

"Can you prove it?"

"I think so. If you look at these lists you'll notice two odd things. The first is that the accusations are not vague and general. They're all quite definite. Some of them are silly things. Some dishonest. Some border on the criminal. In fact, just the sort of things you might expect a solicitor to hear about from his clients in the course of a day's work."

Watterson grunted. He had no great opinion of solicitors. Tiresome people who cross-ex-

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amined policemen and threw dust into the eyes of magistrates.

"The second thing is that no one *except Mrs. Key* has had more than half a dozen. And she must have had nearly a hundred."

"You mean that all the others were a cover for the attack on her?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"And the object?"

"The object," said Petrella, "was to finish her. And it succeeded. The letters were written, and the envelopes were typed out by a Miss Eileen Fairweather. She is secretary to young Mr. Mellors, junior partner in Mellors and Rapp. I'm told that she's a conscientious girl, and sometimes stays behind to finish Mr. Mellors' letters. This gives her the run of six different typewriters in the general office. She used different machines and different envelopes so that Mrs. Key would be bound to open the letters."

"Clever."

"Too clever. She didn't realize that the print of a typewriter can be identified as certainly as a fingerprint."

He laid six sheets of typing paper and six envelopes on the table, and said, "Central is quite definite about it. There's not the least room for doubt. Those envelopes were typed on the six machines in the offices of Mellors and Rapp."

"Why did she do it?"

"She did it for £40,000. She's engaged to Ronald Blanshard, who is Mrs. Key's only surviving relative, and inherits that sum under her will. She just couldn't wait for the old lady to die in the natural way."

Watterson brightened up. "That's better," he said. "That's something a jury will understand."

"I'm afraid it won't come to a jury."

"Why not? It seems a clear enough case."

"A case of what?"

The Superintendent started to say something, changed his mind, and said, "Hmm. Murder? Manslaughter? Conspiracy to procure suicide? I see there might be some difficulty there. What about demanding money with menaces?"

"She was careful never to ask for money."

"Public mischief then? Misuse of Her Majesty's mails?"

"That's more like it. A fine for a first offense."

"It doesn't seem adequate."

"It will be quite adequate," said Petrella grimly. "Once her name is mentioned in the papers there'll be fifty people round here after her blood."

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The Superintendent considered the matter. He said, "Do we charge Blanshard as well? Do you think he was in it?"

"There's no direct evidence against him, but we'll soon know, won't we?" When Watterson looked puzzled, Petrella said, "As soon as the truth comes out. If he *was* in it with her, you may be sure he'll stick to his guns, brazen it out, and marry her. They'll have to move away and live somewhere else. But they'll go through with it. On the other hand, if he *didn't* know about it, he won't touch her with a barge pole. He'll refuse to have anything more to do with her. He would have no other course open to him."

Here Petrella was wrong.

Three days after the preliminary hearing in the Magistrate's Court had been adjourned for the defense to consider the technical evidence, a patrolling policeman found Ronald Blanshard's little car parked in a quiet turning behind Woolcoombe Park. Eileen Fairweather was in the front seat. She had been shot through the head. Ronald was slumped over her. After killing her he had shot himself. He had used a German automatic which his father had brought home as a souvenir on one of his leaves from North Africa.

Woolcoombe Park is not in Q Division, and Petrella only learned about it when he read the paper the following morning. Hard on the heels of the report came Mrs. Oldenshaw. She was so upset that it was a few minutes before Petrella could gather what she was trying to tell him.

She said, "What shall I do with it? The money, I mean. They say I shall have it all now. I don't want it!"

"You'd better consult the solicitors," said Petrella. "They'll tell you what to do."

"Oh, them. They just say it's mine, and I've got to have it. I wouldn't have said 'no' to a little bit. That's what Mrs. Key meant me to have. She didn't mean me to have it all."

"If you really want to get rid of some of it," said Petrella, "why don't you give it to Father Amberline, at St. Marks? His parish can use it."

"Q"

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He was a prisoner, constantly guarded. But he had an important message to communicate to the outside world . . .

THE PRISONER

by EDWARD WELLEN

He absently brushed a few specks of dust from the desk but did not really feel in the mood to get down to work. He looked around the cluttered office. There was so much to do. And, God knew, he desperately wanted nothing to go wrong.

But on impulse he quietly—any sudden loud noise would bring a guard running—opened the bottom right drawer and took out his binoculars. The binoculars were a way of escape. He kept to one side of the window, out of sight of the guard he heard coughing and shifting below the window, and peered out beyond the gate.

It was just past dawn, and traffic was light in the streets outside his prison. He focused the binoculars. At the nearest intersection came the young paper boy riding his bike no-handedly. He could not hear, of course, but from the cant of the head he knew the boy was whistling or singing.

Suddenly a car shot into sight, taking the turn too swiftly, too sharply. It struck the bike, toppling the boy and his basket of papers. The car slammed to a shivering stop.

Instinctively he burned the license-plate number into his mind.

The driver's door opened. The driver got out and with the exaggerated sobriety of the truly drunken walked back to the still form, looked down at it, then with a shock into true sobriety looked wildly around, hurried back into his seat, and drove off.

Watching it all, he himself felt a shock into something beyond sobriety. He should have recognized the car on sight, for he had seen it before, had more than once from this same window seen Pardee breeze by with the top down. And each time he had smiled a twisted smile knowing the thought that must have gone through Pardee's mind as he

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passed by: by God, *he* was inside these walls of gray sandstone painted white and Pardee was *outside*.

He started guiltily from his trance, hearing the siren of an ambulance, nearing, nearing, then on the spot and moaning into silence. He had known instantly, by the terrible fling and the ragdoll fall, and by the mangled bike, that the boy was past saving. Still he felt thankful someone had quickly sent for help. It was now out of his hands.

Grimly he put back the binoculars and started to work. Someone else must have seen Pardee, just as someone else had seen the still form in the street and summoned the ambulance.

But no. As the day wore on he managed to listen to the local news broadcasts and learned the police had no leads to the hit-and-run driver.

His mouth tightened. He could not remain silent. But it would be impossible for him to speak out. He thought wryly how much easier it would've been for him to identify Pardee. The man was someone he didn't know.

He could not go into court and permit a clever defense lawyer to cross-examine him and make capital of the dislike he and Pardee had for each other.

"Isn't it a fact that you and Mr. Pardee have been known to be enemies for years?"

He would have to say yes. It was the truth.

But even if he got off with merely giving a deposition, the shadow of suspicion would linger—more than a shadow, a stain—the suspicion that private spite had lurked behind public spirit.

He looked around in frustration at the walls that closed him in.

Then voices broke in on him, voices from the yard outside. He had forgotten. It was a Visitors Day.

The people passing in through the gate were usually a distraction, but now their hushed intensity was a convincing reminder of where he was.

He eyed the phones on the desk ruefully. One disguised call to the local police would suffice; but he could hardly make an anonymous call from here.

Then he had it. The least he could do—and the most—was to write an anonymous note. The time was now, while he thought of it and had this rare chance.

He stepped back to the desk, drew a piece of stationery toward him, stood leaning over it, and picked up a pen to begin. No. First things first. He took up a ruler, covered the letterhead, then lifted the bottom of

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the sheet to tear it off below the letterhead. But as he did so light passed through the paper, outlining the watermark. He let the sheet fall flat. All the stationery on the desk bore that revealing letterhead and watermark.

The scratch pad. He took up the ballpoint pen again and printed his message painstakingly in characterless block letters. No one would ever find out he had written it or that it had come from within these walls.

But what now? Even if he found a plain envelope he would never be able to smuggle the letter out. He might manage to pass through the mail room, but how could he slip the envelope into the outgoing mail without someone noticing? He was always being watched.

Cross that bridge when he came to it. He was wasting time. He whirled his glance around the room and saw a book on a shelf in a plain dust wrapper. He grabbed the book and pulled. It was tightly wedged in and pulling it out caused a book alongside to fall to the floor.

The thump of the book on the carpet had an echoing thump in his heart. He waited frozen for a guard to rush in. No one came. He let out his breath slowly. The carpet had a deep pile and the thump had seemed louder to him than it really was.

He took off the dust wrapper and spread it out on the desk. He found a used envelope stuffed with some news clippings, dumped the clippings into the wastebasket, and pulled the side and bottom flaps of the envelope unstuck. Using the spreadeagled envelope as a pattern, he cut the dust wrapper to its shape and matched the folds. Now he had a plain envelope. He shoved the letter inside, sealed all the flaps with dabs from a small stick of glue, then printed an address on the envelope.

All that had taken only a few minutes. The group of visitors was off to one side still admiring the garden. Now to distract the guard under the window.

He tossed a pen—there were lots of pens—into a bush off to the right. The alert guard whipped around, reaching for his gun in the same motion, and headed for the bush.

Quickly now, while the guard's back was turned. He sailed the envelope out to the left. He agonized over its flight —rather, its fall; watched it tilt and plummet like a broken-winged bird until a swirl of wind carried it out into the open near the path.

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The guard came back to his post, shaking his head.

Time passed. The sky darkened. It was clouding up to rain, and rain would beat the address on the envelope into soggy illegibility. The guard had still not noticed it.

Then the man coming on to relieve the guard saw it and picked it up.

"What's this?"

"Dunno. Let's have a look."

They frowned over the address.

"Guess one of the visitors left it there. I better take it right in."

Listening to them he smiled. Then a thought struck him and he stepped quickly away from the window and went to the desk.

He could barely make out the shadow-edged imprint of his message on the top sheet of the scratch pad.

I WITNESSED THIS MORNING'S HIT-AND-RUN ACCIDENT BUT I CAN'T GET INVOLVED.

The message ended with the car's license-plate number.

Hurriedly he tore off the top half-dozen sheets, made a spill of them, lit a match, and burned the sheets to char in the ashtray.

Just in time. There was a buzz. He pressed a switch.

"Yes?" he said, his voice calm.

"Sorry to break in on you, Mr. President, but something politically touchy has just come up—"

Politically touchy, yes. They had done a quick check on the license number. But no one—not even Senator Pardee—could reproach him for forwarding an anonymous letter to the Chief of Police of the District of Columbia.

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

When Mr. Strang, the little old science teacher at Aldershot High School who doubles as a detective, has faith in one of his students, it takes something special to break or even shake that faith; and that "something special" is really a simple thing—evidence. Mr. Strang combines science and skepticism (one of the best formulas leading to successful detection) to find the only thing he accepts and believes—hard evidence . . .

MR. STRANG DISCOVERS A BUG

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

It was only the end of the third period, but already Mr. Strang knew he was going to have a bad day. An exploding test tube in chemistry class had spattered his shirt, tie, and jacket with a bright red dye which he knew no amount of cleaning would remove. He had unwittingly touched the business end of a fully charged Leyden jar, thus receiving a jolt of electricity which not only numbed his hand but caused his few remaining hairs to stand out from his head in a halo effect which embarrassed him and brought gales of laughter from his students. And the Gouramis in the fish tank were all suffering from acute indigestion as the result of a feeding of shavings from the pencil sharpener, administered by someone who preferred to remain anonymous.

But now a free period was coming up, and the old science teacher wanted nothing more than to lie on the couch in the faculty room of Aldershot High School and sip hot coffee. So, when the intercom on the wall buzzed just as he was about to leave the classroom, it was only with difficulty that he restrained himself from wrenching it out by the roots and dashing it to the floor.

"Guthrey here," said a voice when Mr. Strang picked up the receiver. "Leonard, I wonder if

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you'd mind dropping by my office this period."

Marvin W. Guthrey, Aldershot High School's principal, had a habit of summoning teachers to his office without mentioning the purpose of the call. The result was to instill in his teachers a degree of nervousness and insecurity, emotions which Mr. Strang was experiencing as he knocked on the principal's door.

"Come in," called Guthrey. Mr. Strang entered. The principal sat at his huge glass-topped desk, flanked by three telephones on one side and stacks of papers on the other. A balding man in his early fifties, wearing a wrinkled tweed suit, was in the chair reserved for visitors.

"Leonard," said Guthrey, rising, "this is Mr. Wesley Bilik, the head of Bilik Motors, here in town. In addition, he's also president of the Aldershot Chamber of Commerce. And—"

"And besides that," interrupted the teacher, "he plays a mean game of poker every Thursday evening, but he has a tendency to draw to inside straights." Mr. Strang removed his black-rimmed glasses and winked broadly at Bilik. "Hello, Wes," he smiled.

"Good morning, Leonard," came the reply. Bilik turned to Guthrey. "Mr. Strang and I already know each other," he said needlessly.

"So I see." Guthrey sat down again. "Then perhaps we can handle this problem in a somewhat less formal manner."

"Problem?" Mr. Strang looked from Guthrey to Bilik and back again. "What problem, Wes?"

"Do you remember coming to see me a couple of weeks ago?" Bilik asked. "We talked about the work-study program here at the high school."

"Of course I remember," said the teacher. "Some of the kids were having trouble in school, and we thought the answer might be to have them attend classes in the morning and take jobs during the afternoons."

"Yeah," said Bilik dryly. "And you asked me to use my connections to see if the local businessmen would provide work. If you'll recall, I wasn't too crazy about the idea. I mean, the kind of students who couldn't make it in school fulltime just didn't seem to be the ones I'd like working for me."

"But you did offer to give it a try, Wes. You promised to hire Vince Quale at your place, and if he worked out you said you'd recommend the program to the Chamber of Commerce."

"I hired Vince ten days

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ago," said Bilik. "That's why I'm here."

"I don't understand," said the teacher, his brow wrinkling.

"I had to fire Vince yesterday, Leonard."

"Oh." Nervously Mr. Strang polished his glasses on his necktie. "Look, Wes, maybe Vince isn't the brightest kid in the world. It'll take him time to learn what you want him to do. But he'll try. I'm sure of it."

"He's good with cars. That isn't the problem."

"Well, if he damaged something, I'm sure we could work out a way to pay you for—"

"Dammit, Leonard, stop!" Bilik stared at the teacher, his eyes flashing angrily. "What kind of a person do you think I am? I wouldn't fire anyone just because of an accident. But this was deliberate."

"What was deliberate, Wes?" asked the teacher.

"He spied on me," replied Bilik. "Gave out information that was supposed to be confidential. I don't know how much he got paid, but—"

"Wait a minute." Mr. Strang shook his head vehemently. "Vince Quale has his problems with the books, but he's never done a dishonest thing in his life. I'd stake my reputation on that."

"Leonard," said Guthrey in a calm voice, "I think you already have. And the school's reputation, as well. Now Mr. Bilik has been kind enough to assure me that he won't go to the newspapers with this, but—"

"But Vince Quale won't be able to get a job in Aldershot as long as he lives, is that it? Besides which, the entire work-study program will go down the drain. Just to save the school a little embarrassment." Mr. Strang's words crackled with disdain. "What was Vince supposed to have done, Wes? Given away national defense secrets or something? Did he sneak around with his miniature camera photographing documents?"

"No, Leonard, of course not."

"What did he say when you accused him of this spying business?"

"He denied it, of course. But the whole thing is so clear that—"

"It's not clear to me!" Mr. Strang slipped his glasses on and peered owlishly at Bilik. "Now suppose before we hang the boy you tell me just what happened."

"It was the day before yesterday," Bilik began patiently. "J. J. Calish, my service manager, was with me in my office. We were preparing the bid."

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"Bid? What bid?"

"Every two years the Aldershot Police Department advertises bids for new police cars. There are always just two bidders—Bilik Motors and Halbert Automotive, over on the other side of town. Sometimes we get the bid, and sometimes Halbert does. But this year there was more than just the police cars involved."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Mr. Strang.

"The village Sanitation Department let it be known that they're in the market for new trucks—several of them. And they're going to look pretty closely at the police-car bids to help them decide who they'll get the trucks from. The cars and trucks put together could mean a tidy profit for the company that gets the contracts."

"I see," nodded the teacher. "Okay, you and Calish went into your office to prepare the bid. What then?"

"We went into the office just before eleven," replied Bilik. "J. J. made a couple of phone calls to the service department and the salesroom to tell them we weren't to be disturbed. Then we sat down at the table to get our figures together."

"So far Vince hasn't entered the picture at all," said Mr. Strang. "Let's get to that."

"Okay. Around twelve thirty J. J. went to the door and shouted at one of the mechanics out in service to send the kid—that's what we call Vince—to the deli for rolls and coffee. Vince was out to lunch, but the mechanic said he'd tell him as soon as he got back."

Bilik leaned forward in his chair and eyed Mr. Strang closely. "Now the time here gets pretty important," he said. "At about one thirty we had our figure ready. Twenty-two thousand five hundred dollars. I wrote it down on the work sheet in front of me. It was only a few minutes after that when Vince entered the office with the coffee and rolls. He put 'em down on the table right next to the sheet the bid was written on. He couldn't help but see it."

"So?" shrugged the teacher. "You ordered lunch and he brought it. No crime in that."

"No? We'll see. It took J. J. and me another couple of hours to prepare the bid forms and do the rest of the clerical work. It was after three thirty when we drove to the village hall to submit the bid. We were just under the wire, because all bids had to be in by four o'clock. The clerk said that Halbert Automotive's man had already been there before us—at about three o'clock."

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Bilik paused and mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "The bids were opened yesterday," he went on. "Halbert Automotive got the contract for the cars."

"So this year you lost," said Mr. Strang. "I still don't see—"

"Dammit, Leonard, Halbert put in a bid of twenty-two thousand four hundred and fifty dollars." Bilik gripped the arms of the chair. "On a bid of over twenty thousand dollars, Halbert was just fifty bucks below us."

"Umm." Mr. Strang scratched at an ear with one gnarled finger. "No chance of Halbert's bid being a coincidence, I suppose?"

Bilik shook his head vehemently. "Both Halbert and us," he said, "always have submitted bids to the nearest hundred dollars. It would have been a miracle if just at this time Halbert decided to go to the nearest fifty. And I don't believe in miracles, Leonard."

The teacher bit his lower lip. "Then you contend that Vince saw the bid when he brought in the coffee—at about one forty-five. And sometime between then and the time you went to the village hall he passed the word to Halbert Automotive."

" 'Contend' nothing. I know that's what happened."

"What makes you so sure?" asked the teacher grimly.

"Because there's no other way it could have happened. Only Calish and I knew what our final bid would be. And we were together right up to the time we went to the village hall."

Mr. Strang considered this point. "I don't suppose," he began hesitantly, "that there's any possibility of a hidden microphone or—"

"Hold on." Bilik waved his hand impatiently. "When I heard about Halbert's bid I was fit to be tied. But I didn't want to accuse Vince without proof, absolute proof. So I got some experts to examine my office that same afternoon. It cost me a bundle, and they didn't find a thing. No microphones, no wires, no sign that anything had been tampered with."

"What about the possibility of some type of miniature radio gadget? A thing that wouldn't need external wires?"

"No, Leonard." Bilik turned his thumb downward. "The outer walls and the ceiling of my office are of sheet steel. Radio waves wouldn't broadcast through that, according to the men I hired. They told me flat out that there was no possibility of the office's being bugged."

"It sounds open and shut to me," said Guthrey, "if we don't

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get carried away with Mr. Strang's superspy gimmicks. Vince walked in, saw the bid, and told Halbert Automotive."

"And picked up a couple of hundred for doing it," added Bilik bitterly.

"But Vincent Quale just isn't the type of boy who'd do a thing like that," said Mr. Strang. "He was very grateful to you for giving him the job. He wouldn't have betrayed you that way."

"You can't explain away the facts," said Bilik.

"Oh, ciliata!" snapped the teacher. "Scientists have been explaining away the so-called 'facts' for centuries. Galileo was imprisoned for insisting that the earth went around the sun when everyone else 'knew' the opposite was true. And Einstein's theories—"

"Look, I don't want to fight with you, Leonard," interrupted Bilik. "I'll tell you what. Drop by my office when you get a chance. See for yourself that Vince Quale was the only one who could have gotten that bid to Halbert. Then you'll understand why I can't support the work-study program at the Chamber of Commerce."

"I forbid it," said Guthrey. "Leonard, you've embarrassed the school too much already. If this gets to the papers—"

"Done, Wes," said Mr. Strang, ignoring the principal's outburst. "I'll be there after school today. But there is one condition."

"What's that?"

"If I find something that leads to the reasonable conclusion that Vince Quale is innocent, you'll have to rehire him with an apology. And endorse the work-study program to the other businessmen."

"Now I see why you play such a mean game of poker," grinned Bilik. "Okay, it's a deal." He stood and shook the teacher's hand. "I'll see you later," he added.

It was nearly four o'clock when Mr. Strang pulled his ancient purple car to the curb outside Bilik Motors. The shiny machines in the showroom windows seemed to look down their noses at the dented intruder outside, as if the teacher's automobile were some kind of disreputable relative they would prefer to disown.

Entering the building, the teacher walked past the salesmen and found Bilik's office.

He opened the door slowly. "C'mon in, Leonard," called Bilik, looking up from his desk.

Once inside, Mr. Strang looked around. The office, illuminated by fluorescent lights, had no windows. One theory shot down.

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"Just a minute," said Bilik, drawing the telephone on the desk nearer. "I'll get J. J. Calish in here." He raked at the dial four times with a pudgy finger, and the teacher could hear a buzzing somewhere in the rear of the building.

"Hello, service department? That you, Mike? Tell J. J. to come to my office, will you? No, put one of the other men on that job. I want to see J. J. now."

Less than a minute later the office door was opened by a large man in a gray shirt, whose face seemed to have been hewn out of a log with a dull ax. There was a smear of grease on one cheekbone. "This is J. J. Calish, my service manager," said Bilik by way of introduction. "J. J., Mr. Strang."

"Yeah," muttered Calish, taking the teacher's hand in his own meaty paw. "Excuse me if I don't do cartwheels at the idea of you being here."

"It's quite understandable," replied Mr. Strang. "After all, I'm here to try and prove Vince Quale didn't reveal your bid, even if he saw it. And if Quale's innocent, it stands to reason that either by chance or on purpose you or Mr. Bilik let the cat out of the bag."

"Just so we know where we stand," said Calish. "But the kid did it, no question."

"Perhaps. Was the office in this same condition two days ago while you were preparing the bid?"

"That's right," said Bilik. "My desk over there. We prepared the bid at this table here. Not a thing has been touched. Hell, I haven't even allowed the ashtrays to be emptied."

Mr. Strang nodded. "And just where were you sitting, Wes?"

"Right here." Bilik indicated a chair. "J. J. was there, across from me."

"I see. Now I assume you were both equipped with pencils and paper. That sort of thing."

"Why, yes," said Bilik. "Of course. But if you're thinking of a note, Leonard—"

"I'm not thinking of anything just yet," Mr. Strang answered. "I'm just trying to get a picture of what was going on."

"I didn't do any writing at all," said Calish petulantly. "I just looked up costs for the special equipment on the cars and fed the figures to Mr. Bilik."

"He also smoked almost a full pack of cigarettes and whittled up a length of radiator hose into half-inch slices with a jackknife," smiled Bilik. "One of the hunks started smoldering

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in the ashtray. Stank to high heaven." He poked among the cigarette butts in the ashtray and pulled out a small black object. It was a hollow cylinder of black rubber nearly an inch in diameter and about half an inch high. He handed it to Mr. Strang.

"Looks like a washer, doesn't it?" said the teacher absently, and dropped it back into the ashtray. "Now as I understand it," he went on, "at twelve thirty you went to the door over there, Mr. Calish, and yelled for one of the mechanics to get Vince."

"I called Harold," said Calish. "He'll remember. He said Vince had gone to lunch. I told him to send the kid out for coffee and rolls when he got back."

"Then what happened?"

"I went back to the table, and Mr. Bilik and I went on working on the bid. We got our final figure at about one thirty."

"And then Vince came in with the coffee and rolls," added Bilik.

"But you're sure that he didn't show up until after you'd written down your bid figure."

"Positive, Leonard. But what—"

"Did Vince knock before he entered?"

"Yeah, he knocked," said Calish impatiently. "I told him to come in. If that makes me guilty along with him, then I guess I'm guilty."

"Take it easy, J. J.," said Bilik. "Nobody's blaming you for what happened." He turned to the teacher. "J. J.'s been a bundle of nerves for a couple of weeks now. Lots of extra repair work coming in. It gets to you after a while."

"I'm sure it does," replied Mr. Strang. He walked back to the table. "Vince came over here where you were sitting, is that right?"

"He was standing right beside me," said Bilik. "And there was the work sheet with the bid written on it. He couldn't help but see it."

"He left the coffee and rolls and took off," added Calish. "He probably realized what he'd seen right away and phoned Halbert as soon as he got out of here."

"Perhaps." Mr. Strang went back to the desk and picked up the receiver of the telephone. "One of your mechanics might have noticed something about Vince when he left here," he said. "Maybe that Harold you spoke about. Can I get your service department on this thing, Wes?"

"Just dial 2143," said Bilik. "That's Harold's station. Tell him I said to get in here."

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Mr. Strang started to dial. Then he shook his head and pressed down the button in the cradle, cutting off the connection. "It might be better to get Vince himself down here first," he said. "Can I call outside on this thing?"

"Sure. Just dial 9 first. That bypasses the internal circuits. When you hear the tone, then dial whatever number you want."

"I see." The teacher slowly replaced the receiver. "On second thought I don't believe Vince's presence will be necessary."

"Well, at last," breathed Bilik, "you're beginning to see the light, Leonard. You're finally willing to admit that Vince Quale was the only one who could have gotten that bid out of here. Right?"

"Wrong," said the teacher quietly.

"What?" Bilik slapped his hand against the table impatiently. "Look, Calish and I were never out of sight of one another. And the kid was the only other one to see the bid. How else could the information have gotten out of here?"

"As I suggested this morning, Wes, your office was bugged."

"Like hell it was. The men I hired to look over this place are experts at finding any of that complicated equipment."

"There was nothing complicated about it," said the teacher. " 'It was beautiful and simple as all truly great swindles are,' to quote O. Henry."

"Just say the word, Mr. Bilik," growled Calish, "and I'll toss this little squirt out onto the sidewalk where he belongs."

Bilik held up a restraining hand. "Not yet, J. J.," he said. "I made a deal with Mr. Strang that if he could prove the bid got out some other way I'd go along with a program at the high school. Now I'm going to hear him out even if I still think he's crazy." He walked to the desk and flopped down into the swivel chair. "Okay, Leonard," he said. "Who tipped off the bid?"

"Calish. Who else?"

"But he couldn't have! I was with him the whole time!" With a great effort Bilik lowered his voice. "How, Leonard," he went on. "Just tell me *how*."

"Mr. Bilik, are you gonna listen to this sawed-off—"

"Easy, J. J., take it easy. Let him make a fool of himself, then you can throw him out. Leonard, the floor is yours," he concluded, the skepticism clear in his voice.

"Very well." Mr. Strang whipped off his black-rimmed glasses and placed them carefully in a jacket pocket. "I first

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became suspicious when you told me that Calish shouted out the door for a mechanic to get Vince to bring rolls and coffee."

"What's so suspicious about that?" Bilik shot back. "We were hungry."

"I'm sure you were. But there's a telephone on the desk that connects with the service department. Wouldn't it have been easier just to dial the extension, rather than getting up and going to the door and yelling?"

Bilik considered this. "Well," he said finally, "I guess so. But it's really not that important, is it?" He spun about to face Calish. "Why didn't you use the phone, J. J.?"

"I dunno. I guess that—"

"I'll tell you why," said the gnomelike little teacher. "He didn't use it because it was already being used—used to pick up every word you two said in this office. That's your bug, Wes—the telephone right next to your hand."

Bilik considered the instrument as if it were some loathsome insect. "But it's been examined," he said. "There were no special attachments, and no taps on the line."

"I didn't say anything about special attachments or taps. Just the phone itself. An ordinary telephone—a bit old-fashioned, but still in good working condition."

"But—but how?" Bilik asked. "Neither of us even picked it up after we came in here."

"Echinodermata!" snapped the teacher. "Stick to one story. You told me Calish used the phone just after you two entered the office."

"Yeah, that's true," replied Bilik thoughtfully. "He called the service department and the salesroom so we wouldn't be disturbed by the phone's ringing. But we hadn't even started to prepare the bid then."

"Ah, but you don't *know* that he placed calls to the salesroom and the service department, do you, Wes? I mean, you weren't listening in on the line or anything."

"I saw him dial, and I assumed—"

"I don't care what you assumed. But all you know for sure is that Calish dialed four digits and said something into the phone. Then he dialed four more numbers. That's a total of eight times he spun that dial."

"I don't have to listen to any more of this!" roared Calish. "Mr. Bilik, if you want me, I'll be—"

"You'll be right here until I tell you to go," snapped Bilik. "Otherwise I'll fix it so you can't get a job repairing cars

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this side of the North Pole. Go on, Leonard. You were saying that Calish dialed eight numbers."

"Correct. Now let's suppose the first one was a 9." Mr. Strang picked up the telephone receiver, jabbed an index finger into the 9 hole, and spun the dial around to the stop. "Now," he went on, "we dial three other numbers." He did so.

"I speak into the mouthpiece, just as Calish did. But listen, Wes." He held the receiver to Bilik's ear.

"Nothing but a buzzing," said Bilik in surprise.

"That's because the call isn't yet complete." Mr. Strang then dialed four more numbers. "What do you hear now?" he asked.

There was the sound of a ringing bell at the other end of the line, and then a woman's voice: "At the tone the time will be four fifty-one and twenty seconds." A beep. "At the tone the time will be four fifty-one and twenty-five seconds."

"So Calish dialed an outside call," said Bilik. "But, Leonard, how did he keep the line open? I mean, I'd have noticed if the receiver were off the hook all that time."

Mr. Strang put the receiver on the desk blotter and went to the table. He fished around in the overflowing ashtray and finally found the short piece of radiator tube.

"This was the gimmick," he said, holding it up with a flourish. "Calish cut a few extra ones while he was in here, just to throw you off the scent in case you found the one he'd brought in with him."

"What are you talking about, Leonard? How could that thing—"

Delicately Mr. Strang fitted the circle of tube over the button in the center of the receiver cradle. "You'll note that the tubing now prevents the button from being depressed and breaking the circuit," he said. "Now watch."

He replaced the receiver. Once it was in place, the black tubing was almost invisible. "Listen," said the teacher.

An eerie voice, high-pitched and somewhat metallic, came from the telephone: "At the tone the time will be four fifty-three exactly."

"Essentially what I'm saying, Wes," concluded Mr. Strang, "is that from the time Calish put through that call until after you'd finished the figures on the bid—which you must have said aloud at some time—there was an open line from this office to whatever place Calish phoned to. Every word you said in here was transmitted directly

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to Halbert Automotive. They had their papers all prepared except to insert the actual amount of the bid, so they were able to beat you to the village hall once they found out your figure. And as soon as Calish was sure Halbert had the information they wanted, it wouldn't have been hard for him to remove the tube and break the connection without your noticing it."

"But why?" Bilik turned to his white-faced service manager, who was shaking his head as if to deny the whole thing. "Why did you do it, J. J.?"

"I didn't do nothing," said Calish brazenly. "Yeah, it probably could have been done the way this nut of a teacher said. But he can't prove I did any of them things he's talking about. It was the kid, I tell you."

"Wes, you said Calish had been nervous for the last couple of weeks," said Mr. Strang. "I suggest that he's rather deeply in debt, and his creditors are pressing him. A couple of hundred dollars from Halbert for this information would have come in handy."

"That shouldn't be hard to check," said Bilik. "But J. J.'s got a point, Leonard. You've shown me that he could have done it this way. But that doesn't *prove* he did do it. Right now I don't know who the guilty party is—Vince or J. J."

"Who takes over as service manager when Calish isn't around?" asked Mr. Strang. "The one who'd cover the telephone in the service area?"

"A fellow named Manny Bates. A good mechanic."

"Get him in here."

Bilik dialed the phone and asked for Bates. In a few moments there was a knock at the door, and Bates, a small fat man, entered.

"Mr. Bates," said the teacher, "think back to the day before yesterday when Calish was in Mr. Bilik's office."

"Yeah?"

"At any time did Calish call you and tell you he and Mr. Bilik were not to be disturbed?"

The mechanic scratched his head and thought about it. "Gee, I dunno," he said finally. "Maybe yes and maybe no. I forget."

Mr. Strang's face fell, and a smile played about J. J. Calish's lips. "You see," said the service manager. "You can't prove a thing. It's just your word against—"

"Just one thing, Mr. Bilik," interrupted Bates in a squeaky voice.

"What's that, Manny?"

"Well, I do remember that

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while you were making out the bid, I tried to call your office several times. Maybe I shouldn't have, but old Mrs. Winter was out there raising the dickens about some repairs we'd done. Nothing would make her happy except talking to you personally. Between eleven in the morning and one P.M. I must have dialed your office number at least half a dozen times."

"And?"

"Well, your office phone was always tied up. I mean while you and Calish were in here that receiver must have been off the hook all the time."

Bilik looked from Mr. Strang to Calish, who seemed to sink lower in his chair. Finally Bilik spoke to the teacher in a voice that was soft, almost sad.

"Tell Vince Quale how sorry I am about all this—no, I'll tell him myself," he said. "He can come back to work here any time he wants to."

"Q"

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Most of Scott Edelstein's work has appeared in the science-fiction field. Here is his first "suspense story"...

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

by SCOTT EDELSTEIN

One gray Monday morning Cunningham's wife was impressed by a story she read in the newspaper. It was a tiny story set in the lower left-hand corner of page 29.

"Listen to this," she said to him, the muscles of her forehead tightening just a bit in concern (Cunningham consistently noticed such small reactions, and therefore considered himself to be a good judge of human character). "'Judge Franklin R. Twayne today sentenced Richard Nelson, twenty-two, to twenty years in prison for possession of marijuana. Several times during the trial Judge Twayne verbally objected to Nelson's "disgusting long hair and filthy beard." In delivering the sentence Twayne said, "I realize that you have done nothing worse than many other young people, most of whom have received considerably lighter penalties. I have no grudge against you personally. However, I feel that it is about time young people—particularly those who insist on the grooming habits of apes—learned some respect for the laws that govern their country, and there is no better way to start than to show that criminals are not always pampered. You are being used as an example, and I hope sincerely that others will learn from it."' "

She looked up from the newspaper. "Have you ever heard of anything so disgusting before? I mean, this is America, and that man is a *judge*."

Cunningham had been listening only slightly, as usual. His wife had always been something of a political activist and was often calling his attention to small items that, to her, indicated what was wrong with the country. Cunningham normally was not interested in any of what she said on the subject and considered her opinions (which, when necessary, he affirmed) to be her business

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entirely. This particular item, however, piqued Cunningham more than even he would have suspected.

How did that man Nelson feel when his sentence was delivered? Cunningham thought, now totally unable to wrench his thoughts from the incident. In his mind he pictured a courtroom, where a worried young man stood respectfully before the bench from which a drunken, wizened judge issued his sentence with a low angry rasp. Cunningham realized, of course, that this setting was totally his own concept; it was just as likely that the judge was a handsome, strong-looking, middle-aged man and the defendant a short, sloppy, greasy-looking boy. But the initial image persisted, and Cunningham tried to burrow deep inside his fantasy-defendant's soul, tried to feel the tremendous hatred the man must have had for the judge.

And then the other question presented itself, and Cunningham could not keep himself from thinking: *And how did the judge feel when he realized that such overwhelming hatred was being directed toward him?* Perhaps the judge felt a sense of sadness, even of regret; he did not like to give such a harsh sentence, but he felt an obligation to the social structure to adequately punish the guilty. Perhaps he felt a perverse thrill in placing the poor man in jail; he relished the power he exercised and used it to the fullest extent for his own pleasure. Or perhaps the judge was immature and had recently been attacked by a young junkie, and was getting his juvenile revenge by imprisoning a different young man.

"Things are tough," Cunningham said to his wife to provide her with some indication that he had been listening; but she glared at him and he knew that his response had been inadequate.

"Is that all you can say?" she demanded. "What if you were caught with dope and it happened to you? How would you feel then?"

But he was not interested in that particular side of the relationship; he was fascinated by the emotions of the judge. *How does it feel to be hated, to do something really foul and to be despised for it?*

The question did not leave him throughout breakfast, nor did it leave him as he drove to work, when he should have been considering the trifles of the business day.

Driving along, he saw a small boy, no more than five years old, playing with a toy bus on the sidewalk. Cunningham pull-

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ed to the curb and stopped. He had to ease his mind of the nagging question; he felt a small twinge of guilt but he realized that his actions would do no real harm to anyone.

He walked quickly up to the small boy and grabbed the toy bus from his hands. "You like this little bus, don't you?" he said, his mouth twisting into something between a smile and a sneer. He held the bus just out of the boy's reach, but this was not necessary; the boy made no move to retrieve his toy but simply stared at him, wide-eyed and trembling.

Cunningham slapped the boy lightly on the cheek. "I said, you like this, don't you?"

The boy whimpered and nodded.

"Too bad," Cunningham said, throwing the toy down on the pavement and crushing it with his shoes. It occurred to him in a moment of incongruity that the toys he had played with as a boy had been much sturdier. "Oh, what a shame," he said, picking up the almost flattened bus and tossing it into the street. "Your little bus is broken. Poor little baby. Come on, little boy, let's see you cry."

The boy looked into Cunningham's face with eyes that were indeed growing wet, and Cunningham saw the pure hatred in those eyes. He could not keep himself from laughing heartily, and at this point the boy turned and scampered off down the sidewalk, calling for his mother.

Cunningham was suddenly filled with an absurd sense of satisfaction—a sense of satisfaction he had not felt since perhaps the age of nine, when he had asked his father if God was watching over him and his father had replied that He was.

Still smiling, he strode to his car and drove away.

Cunningham's wife had been talking even more than usual lately, perhaps because Cunningham was not paying much attention. Cunningham felt that, like her vocal politics, this was her business entirely, and he was not about to change his habits to suit her peculiarities. She had taken to reading him news items at breakfast, perhaps in an effort to reach out to him, perhaps simply to break the silence.

"Did you hear about the kidnaping?" she asked him over coffee another morning. "Some people kidnaped a rich man's child and every hour they called up the parents and threatened to kill the child unless they paid a hundred thousand dollars' ransom."

"No," Cunningham said un-

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certainly, not sure whether or not he had been asked a question. "No, I haven't heard."

She read the article to him—this one from the front page—but he did not listen at all, not even incidentally. He had never been particularly interested in the news and in fact never read the newspaper himself.

But, though he did not listen, he could not rid himself of the idea of kidnaping, and he could not chase away the image and feeling of fear. Two scenes were summoned into his consciousness simultaneously: the kidnapers, making threats over the phone while the kidnaped child sat in the corner sobbing, and the parents, on the other end of the telephone line, desperate, hysterical.

What is it like, Cunningham thought, *to be really feared?*

That evening, after work, he stopped off in a bar for a few moments, something he hardly ever did. He waited until a young woman—a small young woman, of course—entered the bar, then watched her attentively. When she left, he followed.

The dark streets were deserted, as he had hoped. He quickened his step and the woman turned around and noticed him. Cunningham saw the fright on her face and broke into a run after her. She ran a few steps, but he caught up with her quickly and she screamed.

He turned her to face him, holding her by the elbows. Her hair, which Cunningham was sure was made to hang properly every morning, now fell over her eyes. Her mouth was partly open and her nostrils were wide.

"Don't struggle, honey," Cunningham said, with the grin and sneer that came almost automatically this time. "I'm just going to have a little fun with you, maybe knock you around a little. I don't even want your money, just a good time."

He tightened his grip. She squirmed and said, "Get your—" and then cut off her speech and screamed again.

It was there, yes. The fear. The vivid, unrepressed terror, clear on her face and in her movements.

Cunningham grinned wider, then released her. She ran away, stumbling and shouting for help.

"Have a good evening," he called after her, chuckling. "Don't worry. I was only kidding."

The next morning (this third morning Cunningham began to

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wonder if all that was happening had been planned by his wife, if it was all a plot which he was reacting to in precisely the manner she expected) his wife read him yet another newspaper story. This one was about a murder.

Cunningham almost stopped her from reading it, but did not want to get into an argument by being unable to answer her inevitable "Why?" He let her read the item, and he was of course immediately fascinated by the murder. He wondered what it felt like to kill a living creature, wondered if there was indeed an atavistic blood lust that rose to the surface whenever blood was spilled.

That morning, instead of going to work, he bought a hunting knife at a sporting goods store and a beagle puppy from a pet shop. He carried the puppy into the basement of a nearby office building, held it in one hand, and took the knife from his pocket with the other. He had trouble unsheathing the knife with one hand, but finally he was successful and the sheath fell to the floor.

He felt a genuine thrill holding the knife and watching the terrified puppy squirm in his grasp, but this sensation made him uncomfortable, so instead of killing the dog methodically, he hurriedly slashed it several times in the neck. It howled, then whined, then collapsed in his hand, silent. Cunningham let it drop to the floor and placed his bloody hand in his coat pocket.

And even as he turned to leave, the thought struck him: *What does it feel like to murder a human being?*

Killing a puppy, Cunningham realized, did not constitute murder in the accepted sense. A puppy was unable to plead, to grovel, to be forced to do the bidding of the killer.

After lunch Cunningham purchased a pistol.

When he returned home that evening, his wife was waiting for him at the door. "Come in," she said briskly. "The divorce papers are ready."

Cunningham was dumfounded. "Divorce papers? What the hell are you talking about? Have you been smoking dope?"

"I tried to discuss it with you several times, but you were like a brick wall." This could have been true; during the past week Cunningham had noticed that his wife had been making more and more attempts to talk with him. She had gone on at times for hours, or so he dimly remembered. The subject of divorce might have been brought up during these prolonged ravings; however, Cun-

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ningham did not recall making any derogatory comments about her tantrums at any time, and in fact considered himself rather tolerant for not having blown up himself.

On the other hand, perhaps this particular event, like all of the past week's events, had been carefully planned by his wife, and everything that had happened during the week was entirely in her control: the newspaper stories, the pleading, the tantrums, and now the divorce papers.

Cunningham saw the self-satisfied smile on his wife's face and he slammed the door behind him. "You bitch," he said, advancing on her. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? This has all been in your mind for months, years maybe. Everything you've been doing has been part of a plan to get rid of me."

She backed off, uncertainty on her face, and at that moment Cunningham's curiosity overwhelmed him. He pulled out the pistol and pointed it at her forehead.

"My God," she said, scampering backward, her eyes darting from him to the pistol, back to him again. "You're crazy. Completely crazy!"

Cunningham found himself laughing uproariously. "No," he said, "not crazy. Merely thirsty for knowledge, for experience. I want to drink the feelings I never got from you."

"You're insane," she said.

He laughed again, then pulled the trigger three times. The first bullet was too high, but the others struck her just above the nose and she fell backward, slumping to the floor.

It occurred to Cunningham as he put the gun in his pocket that the pistol shots could have been heard by some neighbors. It also occurred to him suddenly that he had finally committed a murder. He tried to recall his feelings during the actual performance of the deed, and found that there had been no thrill involved in firing the shots, only anger, perhaps due to the tenseness of the situation.

In the distance, a police siren wailed. A neighbor must have reported the shots.

Somehow it did not seem logical that punishment should accompany so simple and quick an act as murder, but Cunningham realized that punishment would come. He visualized himself standing before a judge—perhaps the same judge who had sentenced the marijuana user to twenty years.

"Why did you do it?" the judge would ask him.

"Curiosity, Your Honor," is

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what he would reply. "Fascination. A thirst for knowledge. I wanted to explore feelings, understand what it is to live and to die."

And then the thought struck him. As soon as he felt it worming its way into his consciousness he tried to suppress it, but Cunningham was never very good at controlling any part of himself; and as the police siren grew louder he could not help but wonder:

What does it feel like to be dead?

Uncontrollably Cunningham's hand reached into his pocket for the gun.

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a *NEW* detective story by

J. F. PEIRCE

to commemorate a great historical date

THE DOUBLE DEATH OF NELL QUIGLEY: or, Two Views of a Murder

by J. F. PEIRCE

Montague House
London, England
November 8, 1973

Mr. Ellery Queen
229 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10003

Dear Ellery:

Yes, I remember! When you saw me off on the plane to spend my sabbatical year in England, I promised to write "within a fortnight" and send you my address. Yes, I know a *fortnight* is two weeks—not eight months. *Eight months!* Has it really been *that* long? It seems only yesterday.

No, I wasn't skyjacked to Outer Mongolia. Nothing so prosaic! In fact, I arrived in London on schedule (with only a touch of jet lag) and immediately set to work in the British Museum. But before the week was up, a clue that you would appreciate (that in England all crimes must be tried in the city or county where they were committed) sent me posthaste to the borough of Shoreditch, where I've spent the last eight months digging into court records of the Middlesex Records Office for the years 1585 to 1592.

Though I didn't come up with the name I was looking for, what I found doubled my heartbeat. So in apology, since you're both a student and a scholar of all things criminal, I've chosen you to be

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the first to share my discovery—which should make my name a household word in the literary world.

Following, therefore, is a paraphrase of the court record of a murder committed in 1585. Not only is there a murder, there is also a mystery. And while the murder is solved, I'll leave it to you to discover both the mystery and its solution.

THE DOUBLE DEATH OF NELL QUIGLEY; *or, Two Views of a Murder*

Justice Jennings rapped imperiously on the door of The Theatre, in the Liberty of Holywell, which is part of the Middlesex parish of St. Leonard's, Shoreditch. Almost immediately, the door was opened by Constable Sackbutt, a small, slightly-built man with a wisp of white hair on his forehead that came to a point and seemed to mirror his goatee.

The Constable made a quick, nervous bow to the Justice and said: "Good afternoon. It's good of Your Honour to come."

Justice Jennings spoke in a low growl that fitted his bulldog-like appearance. "I came because your message said it was a matter of life or death."

"Aye, it is *that*, Your Honour," the old man said, bobbing his head like a chicken pecking in the dirt. "It is. . .in a manner of speaking."

Justice Jennings' growl deepened. "It should be enough that I give of my time without recompense without having to run hither and yon for no purpose. At least someone pays you to serve in his stead. But enough! Tell me the matter."

Constable Sackbutt pulled at his wisp of a beard. "There's been a murder done, Your Honour," he said.

"Here? At The Theatre?" Justice Jennings said, his growl becoming a bark. "I'll order it closed! *That* will put an end to rowdiness and bawdry!"

"Begging Your Honour's pardon," the Constable said, shaking his head quickly. "It didn't happen here. It were in a tenement near Bishopsgate."

Justice Jennings raised his shaggy eyebrows. "Then why fetch me here?" he demanded.

"If Your Honour will take a seat in the lower gallery, I'll try to explain."

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"Very well, but be quick about it."

"Aye, just come this way, Your Honour."

Justice Jennings followed the old man, who limped ahead of him, talking back over his shoulder. As the Constable walked, he "thunked" his long staff down hard on the wood flooring, and it was obvious that it served him both for protection and support.

"As Your Honour knows," he said, "there's been a suspected case of The Plague, and I was on watch near Bishopsgate this afternoon to prevent people from congregating for fear it would spread. I was walking along the highroad when I heard a woman cry, "Stop, murderer! Stop!" and made haste to see who called and discovered a young woman struggling with a young man just inside an open doorway. I at once charged them to stop, on my authority as a Constable, and, to my surprise, they did.

"The woman, as pert and pretty a young thing as ever I saw, gave her name as Susan Coburn, and she accused the young man of attacking her when she discovered him in the act of strangling a woman named Nell Quigley, who lived there in the house."

The Constable paused to catch his breath, then continued: "The young man, for his part, said that his name was Hamnet Hathaway. He denied the young woman's accusations and said that on arriving at the house he had met Susan Coburn in the act of leaving. Stopping her politely, he said, he asked her to direct him to Nell Quigley's apartment. Whereupon, he said, she attacked him without provocation and cried out, 'Stop, murderer! Stop!' "

Arriving at a vantage point overlooking the platform stage, supported by wooden trestles and surrounded by a dirt pit, the Constable halted. The Tiring Room behind the stage was heavily beamed. The playhouse, itself, consisted of three galleries and was mainly of timber, with some ironwork for reinforcement.

Justice Jennings stroked his heavy jowls with his stubby fingers. "Who is—or *was*—Nell Quigley?" he asked.

The Constable helped the Justice to a seat before he replied: "May her soul rest in peace, Your Honour, she was a woman no better than she should be. Her business was men, and since I keep a close eye on her kind in the quarter, she plied her trade here at The Theatre and further south at The Curtain. Her usual method was to strike up an acquaintance with a gentleman at a play—usually one who struck her fancy because of the size of his purse—and then, when the play was over, invite him to accompany her home to sample her wares."

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Justice Jennings shook his head angrily, causing his jowls to quiver. "Such bawdry must be stopped!" he shouted. "I'll close both playhouses!"

"Begging Your Honour's pardon," Constable Sackbutt said, pulling at his beard, "though closing the playhouses will no doubt help to stop the spread of the one plague, I doubt it will stop the spread of the other. If Your Honour would keep such women from using their ends for a means, he will have to close their legs, not the playhouses."

Justice Jennings threw up his hands in resignation. "Of course, you are right, Constable. 'Tis true; 'tis pity—and 'tis pity; 'tis true. Tell me, what kind of woman is this Susan Coburn—the same sort as Nell Quigley?"

"Except for her clothes, Your Honour, I would say no. She dresses the part of a strumpet but speaks and carries herself like a gentlewoman. No, like a lady! I suspect that she's down on her luck, that she's known better days, for she's dainty and refined. Though when she struggled with young Hathaway, she seemed almost a match for him."

Justice Jennings, nodded in approbation. "They say that when a woman's life or honour is at stake, her juices flow more freely and she's able to protect herself with a strength she knows not she possessed."

"Aye, 'tis so, Your Honour," the Constable said, bobbing his head quickly.

"This Hamnet Hathaway," Justice Jennings continued, "what kind of man is he?"

"Quite personable, Your Honour, though beginning early to bald. He's a most courteous and soft-spoken young man and most persuasive, which is why we're here."

"Oh? How so?"

"He made a point I could not dispute, Your Honour. He said that when I came upon him struggling with Susan Coburn, he could have slipped from her grasp, knocked me down, and fled, but that instead, he stayed, gave his name, and answered my questions most politely. Therefore, in return, he requested that I permit him to perform an experiment."

Justice Jennings frowned. "An experiment?" he said, his voice seeming to come from the depth of his bowels. "What sort of experiment?"

"He asked to be allowed to put on two playlets, interpreting

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the facts of the murder in two ways. Since I could see no harm in it and since he put it so eloquently, I could but agree. How did he phrase it? Ah, yes. 'Good Constable,' he said, 'I have heard that guilty creatures, sitting at a play, have by the very cunning of the scene been struck so to the soul that presently they have proclaim'd their malefactions; for murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ.' "

" 'Tis eloquent indeed," Justice Jennings said, his frown deepening. "For your sake, Constable, I hope the young man will make as favourable an impression on me."

"I'm sure that he will, Your Honour. I'm sure that he will," the Constable said quickly. "Ah, here comes Mr. Burbage, the Manager of the playhouse. No doubt he can tell you more about the young man. Permit me to introduce you."

"I know Mr. Burbage well," Justice Jennings said, dryly. "He has appeared before me on sundry occasions. Have you not, Mr. Burbage?"

"That I have," the Manager said heartily, "and may I say that it's always a great pleasure to see Your Honour."

"That's hard to believe," the Justice said, shaking his head, "but I'll let it pass. What can you tell me about young Hamnet Hathaway?"

"Ham? A bright young man, Your Honour. Mark me, he'll go far. Though he's been in London less than six months, having come, I believe, from Arden, he's made the most of his opportunities. When he first came here, he earned a meager living holding horses at the playhouse door—for those gentlemen who had no servants to perform the service for them. And being conscientious, he was much in demand. Then, one day, while he was holding the horse of a gentleman, he observed that one of my ticket-sellers suffered from the itch and reported it to me."

"The itch?" Justice Jennings repeated. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

Mr. Burbage smiled. "He observed that when the ticket-seller collected the price of admission from a playgoer, he ofttimes scratched his head, letting *my* pence drop into *his* collar, instead of into the lockbox where it belonged."

"I see," Justice Jennings said. "If memory serves, Mr. Burbage, the fellow must have learned the trick from you. I recall that Mr. Brayne, your partner, had you up on charges for doing much the same thing and of cheating your actors as well, by having the

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Smith make you a secret key to open the common box from which came the actors' shares."

Mr. Burbage laughed heartily. "Your Honour has a long memory indeed—but that's ancient history. As Your Honour well knows, *charges* are one thing and *proof* another."

"Enough!" Justice Jennings said. "What of young Hamnet Hathaway?"

"Well, Your Honour, after that, there being an opening for a ticket-seller, I offered him the job, but he asked to work backstage instead, so I agreed. Since then he's performed a variety of tasks. He's mended costumes, helped to dress the actors, held the prompt-book, swelled a crowd scene, played the parts of a ghost and an old woman, and even set his hand to rewriting an old play of Robert Greene's to fit our players. But the name *Ham* ill-suits him, for he never hogs the stage, as do most actors."

Justice Jennings shook his head as if in disbelief, setting his jowls aquiver. "He sounds like a rare lad indeed," he said. "Tell me, how does he get on with the other players?"

"Quite well—now that they understand him. At first he set their teeth on edge. Mine too, for that matter."

"Oh? How so?"

"With questions, questions, questions. 'Why do you do this?' or 'Why don't you do that?' and so on. We thought him a bloody busybody, begging Your Honour's pardon, till we got the message he was trying to learn and only wanted to help. Since then he's made himself nigh indispensable."

"How judge you his character?"

"Well, he's no Puritan, Your Honour, but then what player is? He likes his dram when his throat's dry, which is fairly often, and he has a sharp eye for a well-turned leg or a bare bosom."

"Ah!" Justice Jennings exclaimed. "That's more to the point. Tell me, did he know Nell Quigley?"

"Aye—at least, by appearance and reputation. She came to The Theatre often, though you wouldn't have called her a playgoer. She came to see men, not to see plays, but she was a good sort. She was here earlier to-day. She'd come from The Curtain, where she'd learned the playhouses had been closed for fear of The Plague."

Justice Jennings frowned. "If she knew The Theatre was closed, why then did she come here?"

Mr. Burbage laughed heartily. "Out of professional courtesy,

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you might say. Since she couldn't ply her trade for pay, she came to offer me her services for free, by way of a bit of fence-mending, so to speak. Unfortunately, we were rehearsing a new play, so I couldn't accept. Besides, I live next to the playhouse, and my wife's in and out."

"I see. Was young Hathaway about when you spoke to the strumpet?"

"Aye, Ham and I were talking when she came up. I'd just given him the rest of the day off, since we had no need of him."

"Did he overhear your conversation with the wench?"

"Aye. He waited till she left, then asked me to lend him three shillings."

"And did you?"

"Not bloody likely, begging Your Honour's pardon. It's not that I don't like the lad or that he's not honest, but he could take The Plague and die or become involved in a drunken brawl and be killed. Then where would I be? So instead I suggested he sell his sword to one of the actors who's been wanting to buy it."

"And did he?"

"I don't know, Your Honour, but I can find out."

"Later. Tell me, do you know where he went after he left here?"

Mr. Burbage laughed again. "By his own report, to see our Nell. I told you he had an eye for a well-turned leg and a bare bosom, and Nell was well endowed by Her Maker with both."

"Where's Hathaway now?"

"Backstage instructing the players. If Your Honour will excuse me, I'll tell him you're ready."

"Aye, and tell him to hurry."

Mr. Burbage bowed as he left, and Justice Jennings nodded imperceptibly in return, then let his gaze sweep the playhouse. Seeing four women and two men seated in the gallery across the way, he turned to the Constable. "What persons are those?" he asked.

Constable Sackbutt studied the group a moment before he answered. "The young woman seated to herself," he said, "is Susan Coburn. The other women all live in the tenement where Nell Quigley was murdered. After checking to make sure that she was dead and had indeed been strangled, I searched the premises and took statements from the women, all of whom testified to hearing an argument between Nell and a young man, so I brought

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them along as witnesses. It's in large part on their testimony that Hathaway's playlets are to be based."

"And the men?"

"The Manager's sons, whom Hathaway has set to watch the women—though for what purpose I know not. The one on Your Honour's left is young Richard Burbage, reported to be a fine actor. The other is Cuthbert Burbage."

"Are the women acquainted?"

"Those from the tenement are, and they all knew Nell. None knew Susan Coburn or she them, but she says she knew Nell, having met her at The Curtain. The woman in yellow is Elizabeth Carmack, whose apartment is just above that of Nell Quigley. She gave the clearest testimony. I have it all writ down."

"Good! Let me see it."

Constable Sackbutt bobbed his head in sudden embarrassment. "Young Hathaway has it in his hands, Your Honour—the better to instruct the players, he said."

Justice Jennings growled. "He may have your head in his hands as well!"

"Aye. Ah, here is young Hathaway now."

The accused strode to the front of the stage with an easy, natural grace. He had a slender build, and the oval shape of his head was accentuated by his high forehead, the result of beginning to bald. His hair was long and swept back from his clean-shaven face. His most prominent features were his questioning mouth and his widely-spaced, deep-set, hooded eyes through which he intently viewed the world and all its creatures.

The actor made a sweeping bow and began, "Honourable Justice, worthy Constable, and esteemed Ladies! We are gathered here to witness a murder in two acts in which poor Nell Quigley will be twice killed—once by me and once by a person whose name is not known. I will leave it to you after witnessing these two acts of murder to judge who is the real murderer. My life is in your hands. We begin with Susan Coburn's version of Nell Quigley's murder."

"Notice, Your Honour, how he moves to the rear of the platform," the Constable said, "and knocks upon the facing of the inner stage whose curtain slowly opens."

"Thank you for your instruction, Constable," Justice Jennings said, dryly. "I would be lost without it."

" 'Tis nothing, Your Honour. Nothing. Notice how the person

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playing the part of Nell Quigley moves as if to answer the door and prepares to speak."

NELL QUIGLEY: "Yes? Who are you? What do you want?"

HAMNET HATHAWAY: "I'm one of the players, sweet Nell. I saw you earlier at the playhouse. And since our Manager couldn't come to play with you, I've come to perform in his stead."

NELL QUIGLEY, *laughing:* "What, send a boy to play a man's part? Surely you jest. Ah, I remember you now, Infant. I've seen you play. Why, you're not yet dry behind the ears, and I'm no wet nurse to minister to you. Be gone! I'll have no part of you!"

HAMNET HATHAWAY: "But I'll have part of you, woman, whether you will or no."

"Look, Your Honour!" Constable Sackbutt said, excitedly. "See how he seizes her as if to force his unwanted attentions upon her!"

"I see, Constable. I see."

NELL QUIGLEY, *angrily:* "Take your hands off me, sirrah, or I'll give you a present—a pair of cuffs, one for each of your pretty cheeks! I know your kind and your reputation."

HAMNET HATHAWAY, *angrily:* "You go too far, woman! Here is a present for *you*—a necklace for your lily throat!"

"Look, Your Honour! See how he makes a necklace of his fingers to strangle her. See how she struggles in vain to cry for help."

"I see! *I see!*"

"Look, Your Honour! Now a pretty maid comes to the door and peers in. It's Susan Coburn, I warrant. Now young Hathaway looks up and sees her. Now he drops Nell Quigley's lifeless body and starts toward Susan Coburn who flees. Now he catches up with her. They struggle!"

SUSAN COBURN, *struggling with Hamnet Hathaway and crying out:* "Stop, murderer! Stop!"

CONSTABLE SACKBUTT, *calling off:* "Hallo ho! Who calls there? What's the matter? Speak, I charge you!"

"By my troth, Your Honour, I warrant that's me."

"Enough, Hamnet Hathaway!" Justice Jennings called, loudly. "We know what transpired thereafter. Show us now your second act of murder."

"As you will, Your Honour," Hamnet Hathaway replied. "But give us a moment, please, to bring Nell Quigley back to life and make a change of costume."

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"Very well, but quickly."

"I wish you had not brought the play to such a sudden stop, Your Honour," Constable Sackbutt said, shaking his head sadly. "I would have had you see how bravely I studied the victim's body, how carefully I searched the premises—finding a man's jacket, shirt, and shoes 'neath Nell Quigley's bed. Doubtless some poor devil was with her when his wife came knocking at the door, and he fled through the window without his clothing."

He hesitated a moment, then went on: "If I were young Hathaway," he said, "I would have started my play with *that* scene, as a comic prelude to the tragedy that followed—to give it the greater emphasis. Ah, here's the young man now, ready to continue."

"And now, Honourable Justice, worthy Constable, and esteemed Ladies, we present the second murder of Nell Quigley as *I* envision that it happened."

"Notice, Your Honour, how he leaves the stage and a young lad of sixteen or seventeen summers takes his former role. See how the lad moves to the rear of the stage and knocks."

"Enough, old man! *Enough!*" Justice Jennings protested. "I have eyes. I can see! I have ears. I can hear! Be still and listen."

NELL QUIGLEY: "Yes? Who are you? What do you want?"

YOUNG LAD: "I'm one of the players, sweet Nell. I saw you earlier at the playhouse. And since our Manager couldn't come to play with you, I've come to perform in his stead."

NELL QUIGLEY, *laughing:* "What, send a boy to play a man's part? Surely you jest. Ah, I remember you now, Infant. I've seen you play. Why, you're not yet dry behind the ears, and I'm no wet nurse to minister to you. Be gone! I'll have no part of you!"

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YOUNG LAD, *angrily:* "You go too far, woman! Here is a present for *you*—a necklace for your lily throat!"

"Look, Your Honour, they struggle, but this time Susan Coburn does not appear at the door. Now the villain drops Nell Quigley's body, as an impatient child might drop a toy. *Now* look what he's doing! He's taking off his jacket, his shirt, his shoes. Now he's putting on one of Nell Quigley's dresses, lacing it up!

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Now he makes ready to leave. Ah, young Hathaway appears and stops the villain."

HAMNET HATHAWAY: "Begging your pardon, Miss, but can you direct me to Nell Quigley's apartment?"

YOUNG LAD, *seizing Hamnet Hathaway and crying out in a falsetto:* "Stop, murderer! Stop!"

"Look, Your Honour, they struggle."

"Yes, Constable, I see!" Justice Jennings said, throwing up his hands in resignation.

CONSTABLE SACKBUTT, *calling off:* "Hallo ho! Who calls there? What's the—"

"Quick, lads!" Hamnet Hathaway shouted, leaping into the pit. "Susan Coburn's trying to escape! After her, lads, after her!"

"Look, Your Honour! Mr. Burbage's sons are chasing Susan Coburn! Look how awkwardly the poor lady runs! Ah, they've caught her easily. But see how vigorously she struggles! Gracious, what language! And I thought her a lady."

"Good work, Dick, Bert!" Hamnet Hathaway shouted, rushing to assist them. "Bring the wench here—to Justice Jennings."

Struggling and screaming, Susan Coburn was dragged before the Justice, and all three young men were required to restrain her.

"Now, Dick," Hamnet Hathaway said, "if you'll lift the strumpet's dress, we'll see what treasure it conceals."

"Stop, sirrah! Cease! *Desist!*" Constable Sackbutt shouted, rising to his feet and raising his staff as if to strike the actor; but his protests were in vain, for Richard Burbage lifted the young woman's skirt to reveal a man's hose and knee britches.

" 'Pon my soul!" Constable Sackbutt exclaimed, dropping back upon the bench and letting his staff fall with a thud. "This is passing strange."

Justice Jennings shook his head in disbelief. "Tell me, Hamnet Hathaway, since you seem to know, who *is* this person?"

"I know not his name, Your Honour," the young man replied, "but I suspect he's one of the boy actors who play women's parts at The Curtain."

"And what caused you to suspect him? Obviously you did—since you had men watching him."

"Because he seized me for no reason and cried, 'Stop, murderer! Stop!' I was sure then that he was the murderer, since he wished to direct suspicion to me—no doubt because I'd seen him leaving and could associate him with the crime."

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"But why didn't he just step into the street and hurry away?"

"Since I had stopped him and asked for directions to Nell's apartment, he knew that I'd probably discover her body before he could make good his escape—because he couldn't run in Nell's dress and shoes. If Your Honour will look closely, you'll see that her shoes are too small for him. No doubt his feet are killing him, *her* shoes squeezing *his* feet just as *he* squeezed *her* throat. There's a certain justice in it. I'm sure Your Honour appreciates the irony."

"But what caused you to suspect he was a boy and not a woman as he appears to be?"

"A number of things, Your Honour. When he addressed the good Constable, his manners and speech were those of a lady, yet he was dressed like a strumpet. Too, Elizabeth Carmack reported hearing Nell call him 'Infant,' which is the slang term for a boy actor who plays women's parts. But it was the way he was embusked that made me sure of it."

"The way he was *embusked?*" Justice Jennings repeated.

"The dress he's wearing is tightly laced to raise and reveal breasts he does not have. Only a woman well endowed by Her Maker with a bounteous bosom would wear such a dress. When the lad decided to disguise himself, there was no way for him to hide his lack of bosom with plumping, or padding, as he would have on the stage."

Justice Jennings shook his head as if in disbelief. "How do you know such things?" he asked.

"From working with costumes and from dressing the actors. We could never use such a dress on stage. And unfortunately for the lad, Nell had no other kind. When the Constable searched her room, I checked her wardrobe."

"I see," Justice Jennings said, then turned to "Susan Coburn." "What is your name, lad," he asked, "and what say you in your defence?"

"My name is Jeremy Peyton, Your Honour. I play principle women's parts at The Curtain. When I went to see Nell Quigley after overhearing her offer herself to our Manager, Mr. Lanman, she laughed at me—made false charges against me, implied that all boy actors are homosexuals. She was dirt! *Dirt!* She deserved to die!"

Justice Jennings shook his great head sadly. Turning to Constable Sackbutt, he said, "Take him before the Sexton and

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charge him. Tell the Sexton he's to be bound over till the next session. Then take him to prison. No doubt the other prisoners will welcome the sight of him."

Jeremy Peyton blanched. "Pray send me not to prison dressed like *this*, Your Honour, I beg you!" he pleaded. "Punish me any way you will. Kill me now! But don't do *that* to me!"

Justice Jennings hesitated, then nodded in agreement. "Very well," he said. "Probably it will prevent a riot. Constable, ask Mr. Burbage if he'll lend the lad some clothes and spare someone to assist you to take him to prison."

"Yes, Your Honour."

"I have some clothes in the Tiring Room he can have," Richard Burbage said, "and my brother and I will assist the Constable."

"Very well, I'm sure he'll thank you both."

Constable Sackbutt bobbed his head to the Justice, then turned to the Burbages. "Take him along to the Tiring Room, if you will, lads. I'll join you in a moment."

"This way, dearie," Cuthbert Burbage said, winking at the prisoner, and both he and his brother snickered.

"Well," Justice Jennings said, addressing Hamnet Hathaway once the others had left, "you've done a good job of work this day, young man. Have you ever thought of taking up the Law? The courts can use one with your obvious talents."

"Thank you, Your Honour," Hamnet Hathaway replied, "but I've found my calling. Where else could I create a world of my own? And begging Your Honour's pardon, when a man can become a god, why settle for being a poor devil of a lawyer?"

"A devil, perhaps," Justice Jennings said, dryly, "but not a poor one. However, I agree that you've found your calling. You've a way with words. What was it that you told our well-meaning friend, the Constable? 'Murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ.' "

"Aye, Your Honour," Hamnet Hathaway replied, smiling slyly, "and if it have *no bosom* either."

FINIS

Well, Ellery, I'm sure you've spotted all the clues, added them up and deduced who Hamnet Hathaway is—or *was*.

1585 to 1592 are the famed "seven lost years" of his life—from the time he fled from home to avoid prosecution for poaching to the first published reference to him in London, in Greene's *A*

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Groatsworth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance.

Since most of what we know of him comes from court records, I searched those of Middlesex and Shoreditch for his name—because The Theatre was located there. And while I didn't discover *his* name, I did discover numerous references to one Hamnet Hathaway of Arden, which I assume to have been his alias. For *Hamnet* was his son's given name, and *Hathaway* and *Arden* were his wife's and his mother's maiden names, respectively. Does it not follow then, as the night the day, that Hamnet Hathaway was none other than the world's greatest playwright—Will Shakespeare!

With warmest personal regards,

Frank

P.S. By coincidence, old chap, today—November 8, 1973—is the 350th anniversary of the publication, by Jaggard and Blount, of *Shakespeare's First Folio.*

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

15 NEW stories — including

J. J. MARRIC-JOHN CREASEY *(about Gideon)*

NICOLAS FREELING *(about Van der Valk)*

EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Rand)*

ANTHONY GILBERT *(about a strange crime)*

PATRICIA McGERR *(about the "Garrison nose")*

BARRY PEROWNE *(about Raffles)*

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This is the 395th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a "first story" that is strong in suspense and admirable in conception . . .

The author, Alexander Agis (a pseudonym), is over 30, has two children, and writes that "I have never met anyone in my life that I didn't see a part of myself in them and a part of them in me." He has had a wide range of jobs—"from mailman, tube bender, and rate clerk to Supervisor of a records center," and his hobbies include "reading, astronomy, chess, and the stock market." (What is "tube bending"? And is there a detective-crime story in it?) . . .

THE BLUE ROOM

by ALEXANDER AGIS

I'd been working at the Gas Company for nearly 15 years before I ever heard the term "The Blue Room." It happened at Harold Bigson's retirement party at Family Pizza, amid the laughter and beer and group singing immediately following the presentation of the gold watch. Everyone was a little tipsy, I remember, and more than a little maudlin in wishing Harold the best of everything in his retirement.

Did I say a little tipsy? I'll take that back—Harold was smashed, and probably a little disappointed at the gold watch. He'd given 43 years of his dull uneventful life to the Gas Company, and now it was all ingloriously coming to an end. If he'd ever hoped to achieve any sense of importance, now was his last chance.

As I watched him at the party that night, an overwhelming sense of sadness came over me. I could see myself, perhaps all of us at the Gas Company, filling his shoes, wanting to achieve some degree of importance. But it was as if we were all on individual merry-go-rounds, and this place, Family Pizza, was where the merry-go-

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rounds swung in tangent to one another. We'd greet Harold, wish him the best of luck, then the merry-go-rounds would swing their own separate ways and take us apart again, this time forever.

It was a sad occasion for another reason: we'd been allowed to see the brass ring we could hope to get if we persevered, and it was a gold watch.

Okie Burnsen, himself a thirty-year veteran of the Gas Company, was pounding away on the piano, and the singing that accompanied him was atrocious. But people were sloshing beer all over one another and generally having a good time. Mr. Kilgoren, the President of the Company, was there, and it struck me as I looked at him that he was mildly disgusted at the whole affair. But it was something the Company condoned, and it was something he had to go along with, so he did. He wasn't a beer drinker any more than I was. I noticed he kept the glass in his hand all night, just sipping from it occasionally, the way he might a glass of wine, and when he finally set it down it was still more than two-thirds' full.

It was getting late, the party was winding down as the beer was beginning to take effect, and Okie had played just about every tune applicable for a retirement party—he was just doing the final bars of his rendition of *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*—and for a few seconds, as the last notes faded away, there was silence. Nobody knew what to say, everything had already been said, and into the silence came Harold's voice, loud and clear. Raising his glass high, he said, "No more Blue Room . . .and no more little buttons!"

Mr. Kilgoren, who was taking a sip of his beer, suddenly let out a burst of air and sprayed beer all over, and then pretended to choke. Underneath the general laughter that followed I was struck by two things: Mr. Kilgoren was very upset, and Harold Bigson was very frightened, all apparently over the words "Blue Room."

Harold had turned as white as a napkin, and the mood at the party quickly degenerated. Soon after the party broke up and everyone went home. As I said goodbye to Harold, I felt his hands trembling, and he shook my hand as if he was *really* saying goodbye, not just goodnight. Mr. Kilgoren hung back, and I imagined he was going to have a few words in private with Harold.

I guess Harold had good

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reason to be scared, for that night he died. Malfunction in some household appliance, or something. I was too shocked to ever check it out.

But I made some clandestine inquiries at work about The Blue Room and nobody had ever heard of it. I knew Harold had been some sort of executive at the Gas Company, but I really didn't know what he did. After I had questioned the other employees for several days, I concluded they didn't know either. Harold's office had been somewhere on the top floor, but I could find no one who knew exactly where it was. Finally the whole thing faded from my thoughts, for I was doing quite well at the Gas Company myself, and couldn't afford to have anything go wrong.

Soon after I got the impression I was being watched, perhaps with a view toward a promotion. Whenever the vice-president, Mr. Fitzpatrick, called me into his office, on some pretext or other, I thought I could detect in him a particular interest in what I had to say, as if he had asked me into his office for just that purpose. But I always went strictly by the book and gave the correct answer. And I never questioned Mr. Kilgoren or Mr. Fitzpatrick, though on several occasions their solutions to problems struck me as not being entirely legal.

The years went by, but somehow I couldn't lose the feeling that I was being watched, being measured against job requirements I didn't know about, but being measured just the same. I kept up a strong façade, ordered my life at home, and always went strictly by the book—unless, that is, I was ordered not to. To say I always followed orders would be to put it mildly. But beneath all this was the persistent feeling that one day I would be called on for greater service to the Company.

Then it happened. Ten years after Harold Bigson's retirement party, they gave a party for Okie Burnsen, who had inherited Harold's old job at the Gas Company. I went to the party, sat through the speeches, applauded when Okie received the gold watch, and had a drink or two. As the party was breaking up, Mr. Kilgoren walked over to me.

"David," he asked, "how many years do you have with the Company?"

He knew very well how many I had—he had probably looked it up in my personnel folder. "Almost twenty-six," I said.

"Twenty-six," he said. Then,

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as if a thought had just occurred to him, he put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Tell you what, David. Why don't you stop by my office tomorrow morning? I've been looking for just the right man to take Okie's place and . . ." He spread a broad boyish smile across his face. "I think I've found my man." He patted me twice on the back, and walked off.

By the time I got home the shock had worn off, and I rushed into the bedroom and flipped on the light. "Carol," I cried, "wake up! I've got news!"

I stopped by Mr. Kilgoren's office the next morning. Mr. Fitzpatrick was there and two cups of coffee were on the desk between them. They both rose and shook my hand, and offered me a chair. They seemed especially happy to see me. I noticed a thick folder resting just beneath Mr. Kilgoren's hand. As he talked he tapped it, emphasizing his words.

In only a matter of minutes Mr. Kilgoren had briefly gone over the facts in my life, both on the job and at home, that he said suited me for the promotion. He seemed particularly pleased at my ability to follow orders without questioning them. Then he flipped the folder shut and turned to Mr. Fitzpatrick.

"I'm satisfied, Jim. Do you have any questions?"

"None whatsoever. Perhaps David has some?"

They looked at me, Mr. Fitzpatrick actually leaning forward in his chair. There were a hundred questions running around inside my head, not the least of which was exactly what was this new job? Did it have anything to do with The Blue Room?

But I couldn't bring myself to ask them and still maintain the expected degree of coolness. The best chance I had of getting this promotion was to do exactly as I had done so far—remain silent, ask no questions.

"No," I said. "No, I have no questions."

"Oh, come on," Mr. Kilgoren said. "Don't you want to know where you'll be working? What you'll be doing?"

"When you're ready to tell me, then I'm ready to know."

"Exactly the answer we wanted to hear," Mr. Kilgoren said. "Jim, I know we've got our man."

"I've always thought he was the right man for the job."

"Good," Mr. Kilgoren said, rising from his seat. "Consider it done." He reached out his

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hand to me. "Welcome to the Executive Suite."

"Thank you," I said.

"Welcome aboard," Mr. Fitzpatrick said.

"Thank you," I said.

"Now go with Jim. He'll take you upstairs and fill you in on the details."

I followed Mr. Fitzpatrick down the corridor to his office.

"I'm not to be disturbed," he told his secretary. "I'll let you know when I'm free."

"Yes, sir," she said.

Inside he closed and locked the door.

"Did you catch what Mr. Kilgoren said about *upstairs*?"

"Yes," I said. "I thought it sounded odd."

"You always thought this was the top floor, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"This is what you'll have to do every night, so watch closely." He went over to a door marked *Gentlemen* and opened it. Just inside was a small vestibule with a closet. There were several coats hanging on a rack. He reached his hand up between the coats and the whole rack of clothes, as well as the wall, slid open, revealing a small elevator. He placed his hand on the rack again, and the wall shut.

"The latch is here," he said, indicating the rack. "You place your hand on the rack and push it upward, like this, and the wall will open." It opened again. "Then to close it, you press down and the wall will close." It closed again. "Now you try it."

I did as he had indicated and the wall opened. "Good," he said. "Now, let's go to The Blue Room."

I stepped into the secret elevator, and he stepped in behind me. Then he closed the wall, which was also the elevator door, and we started upward.

But I was thinking about The Blue Room. His mentioning it was only the second time I had ever heard it spoken of in 26 years.

The elevator door opened and there was The Blue Room—aptly named, for it was decorated in various tones of blue. The blending of shades created quite a pleasing effect. I stepped out of the elevator and looked around. Small, well lit, comfortable-looking. A sofa and a couple of matching chairs around a coffee table. Large ashtray and several magazines on the table. A color TV set. A small refrigerator and a sink over in one corner. A beautiful carpet covering the entire floor.

But the thing that promptly caught my attention was in a corner. It was obviously the whole reason for the room, the

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reason it was there and I was here. I walked over to it and looked at it. A small console, with a control panel of sorts. Letter and number buttons, and a gauge to indicate—pressure? There was a small wireless unit of some kind on the desk, obviously for transmitting information.

"How do you like the room?" he asked.

"It's nice," I said. "What are my duties?"

"Well, mostly you just sit around and read magazines or watch TV or doze, whatever. You'll be alerted when there is something to do. This little gadget here," he said, indicating the small wireless unit, "will chime when it has something to transmit. It will keep chiming until you shut it off, by pressing, here." He pressed a small red button. "Then it will type out a number for you, which will consist of both letters and numbers. Alphanumerical, we call it. You will tear off the printout and press the number on the control panel. That's it. Just be sure the gauge doesn't fall below the maximum pressure for the next half hour. Then you press the red button again, and go back to your TV, or whatever."

"It's simple," I said. But I was wondering just how much he was going to tell me. What did pressing the buttons do? Would he volunteer an answer?

"But very important," he went on. "Most important. We can't afford any mistakes. Be sure you have the correct number pressed on the control panel before you press the red button the second time. And I suggest—no, I *order* you not to mention the name of The Blue Room to anyone outside of this room. Tell your wife you're doing some highly confidential work for the Gas Company. Tell her you cannot tell her anything about the job for fear of endangering national security. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. I suggest you make a list of your favorite magazines, leave it with my secretary, and she'll order subscriptions for you. Now you can go home, after cleaning out your old desk. I'll be here to meet you tonight, to see you off right."

"Of course," I said.

He pressed the elevator button.

"Well, how do you like it?"

"It's . . .wonderful," I said.

"I should think so," he snapped. "It's not every day you get a one-thousand-dollar raise just to push some buttons."

The elevator door closed and he was gone. I rode down alone.

It was a cinch. Everything

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went smoothly for several years. I developed habits. I'd come in to work with a small bag of groceries, go over and check the chimer (that's what I'd come to call it), then fix myself a sandwich and flop down in front of the TV set. Seldom did the chimer disturb me until the last talk show and late movie were finished.

When the movie was over I'd push the red button and immediately a series of letters and numbers would be typed out. I'd turn to the control panel and press out the letters and numbers. After I'd triple-checked it against the printout I'd feel pretty good—seldom did I make a mistake. When I did, I caught it right away. Then it was just necessary to be on the alert for half an hour, in case the pressure alarm went off. When that happened, I'd manually re-set the gauge. Then it was back to the TV, or reading, or whatever.

I worked out a theory about what I was doing. I figured that, as the Gas Company was a monopoly serving the continental United States, I was some sort of "trouble-shooter." That when something went wrong somewhere in the vast network of pipes that connected the whole country, it was my job to press the proper buttons and to get the gas moving again.

The improvement in the gas-control systems whereby the gas could be shut on and off from a central point made my job possible. It was probably worth every cent they paid me. The Gas Company had been having a great deal of trouble with Senator Carlyle, who was trying to have the Gas Company de-monopolized. He had been holding some hearings lately in Washington, and it was beginning to look pretty bad for the Gas Company.

I believed in this theory for several years, until one night nearly three years later. When I got to work that evening, a cold, dreary, wet February evening with slick streets and dark skies, I found Mr. Kilgoren and Mr. Fitzpatrick waiting for me.

"Special case tonight," they told me, and then went back to talking to each other in whispers. They seemed extremely nervous as they huddled around the chimer and waited.

Occasionally a nervous laugh would escape from one of them, and the other would force a laugh. The ashtray was full of their cigarette butts. Mr. Fitzpatrick kept saying, "God, will it ever come?" And Mr. Kilgoren would answer, "I need a drink."

I went ahead with my usual

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routine, daring not to ask any questions or act in any way as if I thought something unusual was going on. But I couldn't help ask myself just what they were doing here. How did they know, *beforehand*, that tonight was to be a very special case? I finally put these thoughts out of my head and watched TV.

About midnight the chimer came to life. "No!" Mr. Kilgoren said to me. "You sit right there. We'll handle it."

He pressed the red button and the teletype printed out a message. I know it must have been a message because the cadence of the typing wasn't the same I was used to. Mr. Kilgoren tore it off, read it, then passed it to Mr. Fitzpatrick. He read it, then took out his cigarette lighter and set the message afire. As soon as it had burned, he turned to Mr. Kilgoren and said, "Let's have it. It's now or never."

Mr. Kilgoren reached into his pocket and took out a crumpled piece of paper. He punched some numbers on the console, then handed the piece of paper to Mr. Fitzpatrick who also punched some numbers. Then they both checked it. Mr. Fitzpatrick took his lighter and set the second piece of paper on fire.

A few minutes later Mr. Fitzpatrick suddenly said, "There's enough gas in there to—" he stopped, realizing my presence. "I've got to get out of here," he said.

"Yes," Mr. Kilgoren said, "let's go."

At the elevator door Mr. Kilgoren turned back to me. "Watch the gauge, will you? I'd hate to see something go wrong now." Then he stepped into the elevator and the door closed.

I went over to the ashtray and looked at the charred remains of the two pieces of paper. A large segment of the first piece was still intact. Charred, but intact. I could even see some of the writing on it. I reached out a hand and mashed it.

The next morning it was still drizzling rain. I didn't want to walk to my car bare-headed, especially as I was just getting over a cold. I picked up the copy of the morning paper to cover my head. It was then, as I read the headline, that the full meaning of The Blue Room and my job in it hit me.

It was then, standing in the rain and staring like a dumbstruck fool, that the horror of what I was hit me. It was a terrible trick—played only because I allowed it to be played, because I had always followed orders without question.

The headline read: *SEN-*

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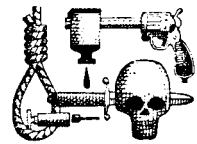
ATOR CARLYLE DIES IN SLEEP. And underneath it told how a *faulty gas heater* had malfunctioned and flooded his room with gas. His hearings were called off.

That's why I've been wandering about the city today. That's why I came here, to this motel tonight. That's why I asked for a room with a gas heater. That's why I've set all this down in writing.

Please, God, forgive me!



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This is the 396th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an odd "first story"—it would be odd if it were a fourth, fourteenth, or fortieth story—odd, but with sly and subtle touches . . .

The author, Carol Cail, like so many others, has always wanted to write. But attending schools (through a Master of Education degree), teaching (mostly 8th-grade American history), housekeeping (16 years with her husband, a mechanical engineer), and mothering (two young sons)—all this has given her no time for writing. Now she is making *the time. Hooray for Women's Lib! . . .*

MRS. LAMB'S NOSE DREAMS

by CAROL CAIL

Mrs. Lamb's nose dreams began early in January. She never had been one to dream. Once in a while she'd have a nightmare about fire or snakes. She couldn't call this dream about her nose a nightmare, but it certainly wasn't pleasant.

In it she saw herself walking down the street as people stared, whispered, and pointed at her. She came to a mirror, and her reflection made her gasp. Where her nose had been, there was now a dark empty space.

The first morning after this dream Marie Lamb told her husband about it at the breakfast table. She laughed, "What would make me dream a thing like that?"

Clayton made a noncommittal sound in his coffee cup and flicked the morning edition open to the stock-exchange reports.

Mrs. Lamb related the dream episode to her mother, who phoned every morning two minutes before Clayton was ready to leave. Mrs. Lamb's major contribution to the conversation was usually, "Yes, Mother" or "No, Mother." It was nice to have something new to talk about.

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That same night Mrs. Lamb's dream recurred, slightly altered. This time her nose was in place as she walked down the street, but she had to move carefully to keep from jarring it loose. In the dream she went into a doctor's office. The doctor kept shaking his head and saying, "There's nothing we can do. Sorry, lambie-pie."

This second dream annoyed Mrs. Lamb. At the breakfast table she recounted it to Clayton. "If it were a knight-in-shining-armor romance I wouldn't mind," she said with artificial gaiety. Clayton patted her arm and asked her to pass the butter.

During the next two weeks Mrs. Lamb's dream haunted her on six different nights. The scenes were not identical, but the theme was always, disgustingly, the same—her nose.

Mrs. Lamb began making a daily inspection of her nose, pinching the tip of it, feeling the bone structure, and looking for changes in her profile. Whenever she was in a group of people, she would try to catch someone staring at her nose.

In the middle of February with the dream continuing to plague her, Mrs. Lamb became certain that her nose had developed a wobble. She began to hold her head stiffly and to avoid sudden movements. Since sleep had become an unpleasant interval, Mrs. Lamb began staying up late at night and getting up early in the morning. Both her appearance and disposition suffered.

Clayton finally demanded that she see Dr. Somers. After a thorough examination, including her nose, Dr. Somers concluded that there was absolutely nothing physically wrong. He gave her a supply of sleeping pills.

The pills worked just fine for a week. Mrs. Lamb began to look and feel more relaxed. But on the eighth night she was aroused by a severe cramp in one leg. Clayton heard her thrashing about and got up to rub the pain away.

"Next time stand up and stomp your foot till it feels better," he advised as he returned to his bed.

When she finally drifted to sleep, Mrs. Lamb had a particularly nasty dream.

The following three nights were the same. Mrs. Lamb would take pills, sleep soundly, awaken with a cramp. As she leaped out of and around the bed she couldn't help resenting Clayton's regular breathing. Falling asleep again, she dreamed nose dreams.

Mrs. Lamb made a second trip to Dr. Somers. He was unable to explain her leg

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cramps, assuring her there was nothing in the pills that could have caused them. He scrawled on a prescription pad. "I strongly recommend you see this man. He's a psychiatrist."

Mrs. Lamb was relieved to note, as she stuffed the sheet hastily into her purse, that she couldn't decipher the writing.

That night, while Clayton was entertaining several business associates at the Beef and Boards Dinner Theater, Mrs. Lamb read a magazine, watched a movie on TV, and dreamed of bloody noses. When Clayton arrived home, he found his wife sitting on the rumpled bed, muttering over a scrap of paper. Instead of her customary effusive greeting she said, "Oh, Clayton. Can you make out this name?"

He studied it briefly. " 'Charles Charter. The Medical Plaza.' Who is he?"

"Oh, some specialist Dr. Somers thought I should see. How was the play?"

Mrs. Lamb had heard the stories of patients falling in love with their analysts, but one look at Dr. Charter eased her mind. He was old, fat, bald, nearly blind, and quite brilliant. During the very first appointment Mrs. Lamb surprised herself by volunteering all kinds of privileged information, even her correct age.

The catharsis she experienced in subsequent visits with Dr. Charter invigorated Mrs. Lamb, but the nose dreams persisted. She tried to be resigned to the monotony of her nose disappearing night after night. Every morning she would report to Clayton, "Well, just the left side was gone this time," or "I was laughing at one of your stupid puns, and it fell off right into the ashtray." The report would be rerun for Mrs. Lamb's mother, who was the only soul she entrusted with the information that Dr. Charter was a psychiatrist.

Then one day, in a pique of despondency, Mrs. Lamb confided her problem to her closest, but not close, friend, Thelma, who swore to keep it secret. Eventually Clayton became the target of backslapping wits who asked about his "nosy wife."

On Mrs. Lamb's thirteenth visit to Dr. Charter, on August 20, he offered his diagnosis. "This dream of your nose disintegrating stems from a subconscious insecurity that you feel, due to your approaching middle age. You are afraid of losing your attractiveness. You resent the time your husband spends at the office. You imagine he has become unfeeling towards you. In other words, if I may introduce some

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levity, your id is singing, 'Will he still love me when I'm old and gray?' "

Mrs. Lamb was so bemused by this that she absently took the copy of *Ms.* she had been reading in the reception room.

Thirty minutes later she was standing in her own living room staring at the words on a sheet of paper she had found on the mantel. Clayton had written: "Marie: Sorry, but can't take any more of this nose business. There's no other woman."

After some floorwalking and handwringing Mrs. Lamb indulged in a crying fit that lasted off and on all evening. At eight o'clock she threw herself onto the bed and immediately slept like a top, log, and/or baby till the phone rang at eight o'clock the next morning.

"Mother? No, Mother, listen. Guess what? I had a wonderful night's sleep. That marvelous Dr. Charter was right. He said I was having nightmares because I was afraid of losing Clayton. So Clayton has left me and I don't have to worry any more. No, Mother, listen. I have some planning to do. Call me later."

On August 24, Dr. Charter received an unscheduled visit from Mrs. Lamb. He had never seen her looking so well; there was a bounce in her walk, a sparkle in her eyes, and self-confidence radiated from every pore. She thanked him, paid her bill in full, and canceled all future appointments. "The situation has resolved itself. Clayton has left me, and I am booked for a two-week Caribbean cruise."

"Mrs. Lamb, surely you want me to contact your husband. If he and I could discuss everything together—there's no reason why you shouldn't sleep well and have a husband at the same time."

The doctor reasoned with her in vain. Marie Lamb had made up her newly discovered mind.

The cruise was a huge success. At first Marie spent all her time sleeping in the sun anywhere and everywhere, always dreaming something pleasant. Then she struck up acquaintance with the girls in the next stateroom, who introduced her into a clique, ten assorted fellow passengers ranging from a priest and his wife to a gay liberationist.

After each day of sightseeing, swimming, and partying, Marie would join this group for an evening of discourse and diversions. The others, delighted in the innocence of their Lamb, gave her a crash education on everything from macramé to marijuana. Then like a prom, the cruise ended too soon, and her new friends

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vanished quickly at the dock.

A taxi deposited Marie and her luggage on her front porch at 7:45 P.M. on September 17. She unlocked the door, picked up the two smallest bags, and went inside.

Clayton was sitting in his favorite chair in the living room. "Surprise!" he announced.

Marie stood there flatfooted.

"I slipped in the back way an hour ago. Had to jimmy the door since I didn't have a key any more. Great to be home again, I tell you."

She just stood staring at him. He cleared his throat and tried, "You're looking great. That tan makes you look younger."

She sighed and sat down.

He began to squirm. "Listen, darling, I realize I made a big mistake leaving you. I should have been more patient with your—ahh—nose. I apologize for everything—and—everything."

"You're back," she said emotionlessly.

He nodded. "In the excuse-the-expression flesh."

"And you're never going to leave me again, I suppose?"

"Never," he answered, nodding and shaking his head by turns.

"In that event would you please carry my luggage upstairs?"

"Of course, my dear," he said through a sigh of relief.

Upstairs he dropped the bags onto a bed and smiled magnanimously at his wife. She walked to the bedside table, saying, "There are more suitcases outside. Would you?"

"Of course, of course. Anything for my girl."

He couldn't help noticing that her hands trembled as she opened the night-table drawer.

He whistled his way to the head of the stairs. His foot was poised for descent when she spoke from the bedroom doorway. "Clayton." When he swiveled, she had the pistol up and ready. She shot him right between the eyes.

The thump-bump-flop of his progress downstairs lasted several seconds. In the subsequent silence she carefully wiped the suitcase handles, put her own fingerprints on them again, and went to the bedside phone. She could just make out the numbers in the rapidly fading light. She gave it a few minutes more, then switched on the lamp to dial.

"This is Marie Lamb. I've just shot a prowler."

The police officer cautioned her about not touching anything before the detectives arrived.

She said, "Oh, I won't. I haven't even looked at the body. I want to be able to sleep tonight!"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Once again—how often it has happened in EQMM!—a new writer has sent us a second story before we had time to publish the first; and once again we have decided to publish the new writer's first and second stories in the same issue, back to back; and once again we ask you to note the astonishing contrast in content—how different from each other the first two published stories by a new writer can be . . .

GARDEN OF EVIL

by CAROL CAIL

Leaning on the kitchen table, washing yesterday's dishes, she could see the garden waiting for her. The August sun bouncing off the parched Kentucky clay made the landscape quiver and weave. All that motion and not a breath of wind. All that warm dishwater and still her fingers would scarcely bend.

Why am I so scared of that garden, she kept wondering. Me, 82 years a country girl and wife. This garden is the same as the others year after year. First you stir up the sleeping dirt, then you mix seeds in it, then you guard it against weeds and rabbits, and, when the time comes, you take what's due you. What did I plant different this spring out there with all the usual peas and beans?

She knew she'd be gnawing hungry in a couple hours, and she'd have to brave the garden. She had stayed in the house three days straight living off the pantry, and now it was depleted except for a bag of sugar and one of flour. Breakfast this morning had been a slice of dry toast and two cups of tea.

The first time she'd sensed the evil in the garden had been one steamy July evening as she waded among the scrambled tomato vines looking for some supper. She had been lazy early in the season, not putting up the poles or tying the plants. Now she was paying for it, thinking about snakes and finding spiders, rot, and rabbit leavings.

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The apparently perfect red fruit she wrapped her fingers around had a slimy underside; her hand came up dripping sour-smelling tomato entrails that she hastily wiped on the nearest plantain. An outraged grasshopper sprang at her, and her step backward crushed a cluster of green tomatoes, the seeds squirting and clinging to her legs.

She had fled to a bare space, one of the rows she'd had the energy to weed, and stood there breathing hard, taking stock.

This familiar patch of truck garden where she had spent hours of her life buzzed and hissed and rustled. She saw the ground teeming with bees and beetles and ants and worms. She felt the fire of mosquitoes and oats bugs and flies devouring her. Perspiration trickled down her spine, and she twitched around to see what had touched her. A spire of Johnson grass tapped the back of her knee, and again she jumped.

She could summon up neither humor nor reason. So she had retreated, abandoning the half-filled basket, to the sanctuary of the kitchen, where she immediately felt foolish.

That was the first time the garden had menaced her. She couldn't count how often it had happened since.

At two o'clock she sat on the front porch swing, pretending she couldn't hear the growling in her stomach. The sun would slither behind the mountain in another hour or so, and the garden would be cooler, she'd rationalized.

From the porch she could see far, or could when she was younger. The view was up, not down. She lived in a cup of land surrounded by wooded cliffs. She counted distance by the ridges, one hill to her nearest neighbor, three hills to the nearest crossroads, and so on. The closest store, where she traded her social security for what she couldn't grow, was five hills away.

She'd never been lonely. Not even when Calvin passed away a year ago. It had been something of a relief to have the place to herself after all those years of doing for him. Now she could sleep late if she wanted, let the housework slide. Let the weeds grow.

"Hey!"

She shaded her eyes and peered into the little wild yard. Long red hair swinging was what she picked out first.

"Hey, Granny! What you doing?" the girl yelled, climbing onto the porch.

"Donna, I swan," she welcomed, her voice coming out wobbly and hoarse from disuse.

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"My only kin in the whole world and ain't you the stranger!"

"Now don't go expecting me to stay or anything. I'm just passing by on my way from California to New York. I couldn't find a job I liked out west, so now I'm going to try the east."

"What kind of work you looking for?" she asked, remembering how to sound interested. She hadn't seen Donna since Calvin's funeral, and not often before that. The child was obviously a hippie. All that hair, and, from the way she jiggled, no underwear.

"Oh, something glamorous. I studied acting at the university. Maybe you'll read about me on Broadway."

"How'd you get here?"

"A friend of mine." She paused and simpered to make clear the friend was male. "Lent me his car. It's up on the road. So I can't stay. Not long enough to let the local yokels strip it down."

The old woman plotted. "My neighbors usually fetch me in supplies every week, but this time I'm short. You go get me a few things at the store, and we'll have us a nice supper and talk."

"No, I don't think so. I really need to be getting on."

"Just a bite to eat. I won't keep you overnight. It would do me good to hear what you been doing and all," she lied.

"Well—" and the right mixture of guilt and vanity made her say yes.

While Donna was gone, the old woman set the table. She knew she ought to at least sweep the floor, but she knew, too, that Donna didn't care about the place being rundown. When she inherited it, she would sell it for whatever she could get and as fast as she could get it. A clean floor wouldn't bring up the price any. Come to that, Donna didn't look too clean herself.

So she sat at the table gazing out toward the garden, thinking how she'd tell Donna to pick extra vegetables to insure having leftovers. "They're just as good warmed over, and it'll save me a heap of work," she'd say. Then she'd watch out the window to see if the garden did anything to Donna.

Not that it had ever really done anything *to her*. But there had been the rabbit.

That was the last time she'd worked up the spunk to go out there. It was three days ago, in early August. The beans and corn needed canning, but she didn't want the job. She'd told herself, Why bother? You probably won't live out the winter anyway.

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So this was to be her usual hurried trip into the now weed-infested garden to harvest a meal's worth. She had started for the carrot row, holding the spade in front of her chest like a cross warding off dark powers. The sides of her eyes saw little movements, but if she looked directly at the spot, nothing stirred. She'd learned it was no good to sneak into the garden, so she plunged headlong.

She overshot the carrots, had to retrace her steps to find them underneath a swarm of morning-glory vines. She put the spade into a likely space and raised one foot to shove it home. That's when she saw the rabbit.

He was in among the vines, and she knew he was dead, but never in all her years had she seen an animal look like this in death. He wasn't lying sideways and limp. He lay on his back, spreadeagled, each foot entangled in morning-glory tendrils, and a bindweed wrapped around his neck.

The spade was still out there. Probably covered by vines now, too. She'd thought about that rabbit a lot, but she couldn't shake off the impression of the garden watching her and swaying around her and whispering that it had killed him.

Of course, she knew the garden couldn't have killed the rabbit. Though come to think, it had killed Calvin, in a way.

He'd been out there hoeing and pruning and thinning all day in the hot sun, just like always, early spring to late fall, taming the wilderness and bending it to his will. When he came in for supper, he was all trembly limbed and dizzy, too weak to eat a mouthful. Just climbing the stairs to bed was the last straw.

She'd heard him from the kitchen. There was a scrabbling on the stairwell wall and then a soft thud thud thud as he hit the three steps down from the first landing.

She didn't try to fetch anyone. She knew it was too late. She did get him to the sofa, and that's where he died sometime during the night, still wearing his garden shoes, the soles caked with dried mud.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . .

The house shuddered as feet hit the front porch. Donna staggered through the door, a grocery bag in each arm. The table squeaked when she set them down.

"Here you are. Don't let me forget to give you your change."

The old woman reached into one bag and yanked back her hand as if it had been slapped.

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"You, girl. What did you buy bacon for? You know I got no use for meat."

"Oh, Granny, I'm sorry. I just picked it up out of habit. You're still a vegetarian, huh?"

"A dollar and eighty-nine cents for something I'll just chuck out," she grieved.

"Well, I'll eat some. Where's your skillet?"

"No. I'll cook. You got to get some vegetables."

She gave the girl the basket and the instructions about quantity, then watched out the window as Donna sashayed into the garden, squatted down in the string-bean row, and commenced to work.

Minutes ticked by. Donna moved on to the sweet corn. After she'd wrested a dozen ears from their stalks, she stood and shucked them all. Next she started on the tomatoes. Her industry was a pleasant surprise.

The old woman walked out to the edge of the garden.

Donna glanced up. "No need to help—I'm through."

"Let's just check if any melons has come ready," she said and boldly entered.

She pretended to be inspecting muskmelons. The garden surrounded them in perfect tranquility. Tan earth smelling dusty sweet. Humming insect songs. Bone-warming sun. Viceroy butterflies dancing.

Donna had found the perennial bed, and she was breaking stems—gloriosa daisies, chrysanthemums, asters, scabiosa, statice. "What's the use of having posies out here where you can't enjoy them?"

Some of the fibrous stems she had to twist back and forth as if she were snapping wires, leaving the stumps bruised and shredded. A tough old aster uprooted in Donna's grip. The garden bided.

The old woman had to say it. "Sometimes—something—out here makes me afraid."

Donna went on plundering the flowers, her face peering over an armload of color. "Well, of course you must be. Alone all the time. You ought to have a dog."

"Paaah. No dog. And no cat neither. I'd be more scared of them than of being alone."

"You used to have a dog," Donna said unkindly.

She didn't answer, remembering the dog. Charlie. A 'coon hound they'd raised from a pup. A vision of Donna as a toddler, teasing Charlie till he cried. Donna's mother, looking white and sickly even then, twisting a switch off the willow tree and stinging the chubby legs. And then, years later, the foaming muzzle sinking poisoned teeth into Donna's pappy's, her son's, hand. She'd mourned

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them both, dog and man. She could never have another son, and she wouldn't have another dog.

Donna said, "Let's get on into the house. I got to leave before it's too dark to find the way up the road."

They made the meal together. Donna was a fast, steady worker, maybe because she was in a hurry to eat and leave; she ate fast and steady, too. The old woman ate carefully, thankful that her fast had had a fortuitous ending. With each mouthful her opinion of her granddaughter improved. She had not let Donna fry the bacon, but now she said the girl must take the package with her as "a present."

"Oh, Granny, in this heat?" she laughed. "It would just spoil and smell up the car before I'm anywhere to use it." She had a carrot stick that she waved around between bites, and, while she chewed and swallowed, she talked. "You really ought to try the bacon yourself. It's delicious. Honest. You don't know what you're missing, not eating meat."

"I'd gag. Thinking of the poor innocent animal. I haven't eaten flesh for prit' near seventy years, and I'm proud and thankful for it."

"Well, now, Granny, if you're feeling righteous about it," Donna teased, "maybe you'd feel even prouder and thankfuler if you didn't eat vegetables either. One time in psychology class the professor was telling us about how plants feel pain same as humans."

When the falling sensation passed, she said, "What do you mean? How does he know?"

"He mentioned it, is all. I guess the class had discussed it another day when I wasn't there."

Her fingers wouldn't support the fork any longer. She asked, amazed, "Didn't you wonder about it? Didn't it worry you?"

"Well, of course," Donna bristled. "But the kids said he wasn't going to test us on it, so it was okay."

The bouquet Donna had crowded into one Mason jar smelled like a funeral.

"Listen, Granny, I hate to eat and run, but I just must be scooting along. Thanks for supper. I'll do all the dishes next time," she promised, laughing and winking. She didn't try to bestow a goodbye kiss, only waved and ran out.

The old woman sat staring at the dishes of leftovers. She wondered if the pain stopped once the ear of corn left the stalk, or did it go on as the husk was ripped away. Was it there while the knife severed kernels from cob, and was it there for

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the scalding water flood? She saw herself forking and chewing and swallowing. At last she rose and scraped out every dish into the slop bucket.

She left the kitchen as it was, hoisting herself upstairs. The first landing had always groaned. This time it froze her in her tracks.

If it is true, she thought, then life is impossible. The house a tomb, made of tree bones. The bedstead, an oak slaughtered by her own father, holding her every night like an open coffin. Books, rugs, pictures, all, all maimed, skinned, murdered. Not just here. Everywhere.

She ground her knuckles into her eyes and moaned, "The tree was crucified first."

She went downstairs slowly, full of dread. She found a shovel in the tool shed, dug a hole by the front porch, and committed to it Mason jar and all. When she'd tamped the dirt and put away the shovel, she walked to the brink of the garden.

Light was fading fast. Crickets had begun gnashing their legs. She sensed the grass blades straining beneath her shoes. The garden crouched before her.

She was trembling so hard she ached. Her voice shook loose and said, "Listen." She hugged herself to keep from flying apart. "If you can understand English," she added hesitantly.

There was no answer.

"I didn't know. I didn't! But now I do, so I won't be bothering you again. Never."

She backed away and turned and made for the house. The skin of her skull pricked with expectation.

Nothing happened.

She went inside and straight upstairs. She fell onto the bed and lay rigid, watching the ceiling disappear. Later she slept, but she didn't rest.

The old woman died the first week of September. She didn't know it because she was in bed asleep. The coroner said it was from natural causes—old age and malnutrition.

Another friend let Donna borrow his black car. When the funeral ended, Donna drove to her inheritance to meet the county's leading realtor.

The two of them strolled around the rocky, weedy yard discussing possibilities. Mr. Howard was reluctant to quote any figure till he'd felt out some potential buyers. Donna wondered if an auction wouldn't be the quickest easiest way. They stopped at the verge of the garden.

"This place looks a lot worse than it is," Donna prompted. "Why, I was in this garden just

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about a month ago, and what a world of difference. Not a weed in sight. Now look at it. A jungle. Of course, if I'd realized how sick Granny was I'd have stayed right here. But she never let on she wasn't the same as always."

Donna broke a tall blade of grass to chew. She said, "Well, she *was* talking kind of funny part of the time. I guess I should have guessed from that. Do you know they say she didn't eat or drink a single thing but milk for three weeks? Milk is supposed to be the perfect food, I know, but, like the Bible says, Man can't live by milk alone."

Mr. Howard opened his mouth, saw she was serious, and snapped it shut again.

"Anyway, like I was saying, the place needs cleaning up is all. Why, Mr. Howard, just clearing out this mess of overgrown truck patch would do wonders. Maybe I could borrow a riding mower before you bring anybody out to look at the property. Or better yet, I could just set fire to it. Pour kerosene on and throw in a match. Maybe I should do that to the house, too." And she laughed, so Mr. Howard laughed.

"Well, first I got to get the antiques out," she went on. "There's a man coming from Corbin this afternoon to see what's valuable and what's just old."

Mr. Howard said he must go, that he'd check around and give her a ring. He left her beside the garden.

Donna watched him pick his way past the house and out of sight up the hill. She sighed, frowned at her watch, and scuffed a sandy anthill shut with the toe of her shoe. She gazed across the tangled garden, thinking about New York. Her eyes fixed on a blur of color; they focused.

She didn't know her flowers, but this one looked like some kind of rose. Dark red and waxy petaled, it seemed to lean toward her, begging to be picked. She measured the distance with her eyes. Two giant steps in and out—that was all it would take. She chose her foothold carefully, a grassy patch that stuck up above the weedy sea.

As she took the leaping step, some taller plants brushed against her inner thighs. She teetered, steadied, reached to break the stem. The flower swayed aside, and she pinched vacant air, startled to have felt no breeze. That same split second something coiled around her left leg. Snake! her mind squealed before she looked. Her pupils contracted in horror. Her

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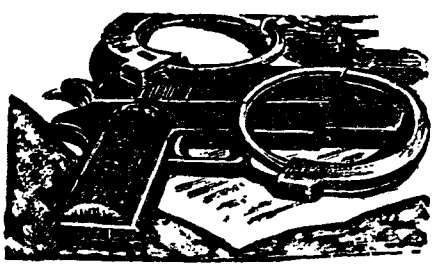
throat scraped with one scream as she fell.

The antiques dealer found her.

Since she wasn't at the house, but her car was still parked on the road, he made a search. He said he was drawn to the garden by the smell, but that was hardly possible, as she had been dead only a few hours.

There were many theories offered by the many people who discussed the event. The most widely accepted, because it seemed the most reasonable, was that the girl had been in the garden when an epileptic fit had seized her. She'd fallen down and rolled around till she was hopelessly tangled in the plants.

The coroner studied on it half a day; then he typed "accidental strangulation" on his report and went outside to groom his privet hedge.



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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Every critic must be on guard against moods. In private life we all allow for moods, momentarily disrupting judgment. When I began considering how for this December issue I might sum up 1973, my first impression was that it had been a very bad year. Then, as always, I glanced through back issues to review what I had written. And the impression *had* been a momentary mood.

Perhaps it arose from the fact that on several occasions, due to a surfeit of poor novels read and discarded, it was necessary to back up current items with classics from the past. But I need hardly remind you (or myself) that we assess quality only by the best. And in all three categories—detection, espionage, mystery-adventure—the best has been very good indeed.

Fair-play detection, *imprimis*, has provided both kinds of flesh and blood. In *Murder Without Icing*, by Emma Lathen, America's First Lady Baffler reveals the plight of the Sloan Guaranty Trust when that stately institution backs an ice-hockey team and provokes two murders for the detective wits of John Putnam Thatcher. In *Elephants Can Remember*, by Agatha Christie, once more an old crime throws its chilling shadow until Hercule Poirot dispels all menace. And with *Murder in Focus*, by Dorothy Dunnett, a compatriot of Dame Agatha explodes comedy-cum-murder among British skylarkers at an observatory in Rome.

This side of the Atlantic has seen three brilliant newcomers. Try Sylvia Angus's *Arson and Old Lace* for dirty work on the crime-bound Maine coast; in *A Dying Fall*, by Hildegarde Dolson, the more-than-dubious bridegroom plunges to death amid *avant-garde* statues; and, in Edith Taylor's *The Serpent Beneath It*, our dirty work paralyzes a quiet college campus. All three, homicidally speaking, will earn your trust.

Nor, as regards detection, has the male contingent lacked skill. Ivon Baker, an Anglican clergyman, reanimates long-gone rumble and menace with *Grave Doubt*. From as far away as Finland comes Mauri Sariola's *The Trevick Affair*; A. B. Guthrie, Jr. (*Wild Pitch*)

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finds a shoot-out problem in the New West; Peter Lovesey's *Abracadaver* chooses deviltry at Victorian music halls; but no background seems so wild as the television studio of the roaring problem set by Charles Larson in *Someone's Death*.

Espionage? There have been some fine adventures for the secret agent, that modern hero trained to take every unfair advantage. Usually either Yankee or Limey, the hero is American in Michael Bar-Zohar's *The Third Truth*; British in Berkely Mather's *Snowline*; British in Burton Graham's *The Spy Trap*; American *and* British in William P. McGivern's *Caprifoil*; and, finally, American again in *Assignment—Maltese Maiden*, by Edward S. Aarons. Nor must we overlook the Irishman of Shaun Herron's *Through the Dark and Hairy Wood*.

The best items in our third category, mystery-adventure, don't let their rattle-bang action prevent them from playing almost as fair with clues as any detective story. *Cornered at Six*, by Thomas Patrick McMahon and Major Brian Patrick McMahon, relates an aerial (and earthly) imbroglio of peculiar viciousness. You won't easily resist the pace of Owen Sela's *The Bearer Plot*, sweeping from London across the continent of its Swiss finale. *Postscript to a Dead Letter*, by Donald MacKenzie, carries a Canadian newsman in triumph through the Paris underworld, whereas *The Matlock Paper*, by Robert Ludlum, blows hell out of a university town near home. From Richard Falkirk have come two first-class novels, *Blackstone* and *Blackstone's Fancy*, about that tough Bow Street Runner in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Recalling that on frequent occasions there has been praise for a book of short stories, I omit one example beyond our scope here because it can be found only in some second-hand bookshop. New and available is *Judge Dee at Work*, by Robert van Gulik, eight cases for a stern but humane jurist detective interpreting evidence in T'ang Empire China of the seventh century A.D. Also available, substantially paperbound, are Wilkie Collins's *Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*, edited by Herbert van Thal, and Ernest Bramah's *Best Max Carrados Detective Stories*, edited by E. F. Bleiler, both recommended to every connoisseur.

In no particular category, neither mystery-adventure nor straight detection though allied with both, Jean Stubbs's 1890 poisoning drama, *Dear Laura*, serves fittingly to conclude this summary of a year which, on the whole, has been no disappointment at all.

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a *NEW* Loren Mensing story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

The new story about Loren Mensing, a professor of Law at City University Law School and deputy legal adviser to the Commissioner of Police, is an interesting amalgam: it is as contemporary as the headlines in this morning's newspaper and as classic as—well, let's say, as A. Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Six Napoleons" . . .

SIX THOUSAND LITTLE BONAPARTES

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Jostling through the Monday afternoon mob at City International Airport, Loren Mensing flicked a glance at his wrist. 2:55. The flat tire on the drive out had made him only fifteen minutes late. Now if Flight 420 from JFK could just be equally late he would not have to make awkward apologies to Mohyeddin for keeping him waiting.

Mensing jogged through the airport's central hub, past revolving luggage carousels ringed by travelers, and swung into the Red Concourse. His destination was Gate 39, at the far end of the bright-painted steel tentacle. He elbowed past another knot of skybound passengers and looked up the corridor.

Between him and the final stretch of the concourse seven armed men in gray-blue uniforms stood blocking the walkway. Loren felt a lump of fear churn inside him.

He pulled out his card case and walked up to the person who seemed to be in charge, a fiftyish hard-gutted man with a laminated photograph of himself and a plastic tag reading CAPT. STEVENS AIRPORT SECURITY protruding from his uniform breast pocket. "I'm Professor Mensing, deputy legal adviser to the Police Commissioner. What's going on with Flight 420?"

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The other bunched bushy eyebrows in a hostile frown. "Why is it your business?" he demanded.

"The law school where I teach is running a symposium on International Peace and the Middle East. I'm on sabbatical this year but the dean phoned me this morning and asked me to drive out and pick up a panelist I'm acquainted with. Noor Mohyeddin, the Jordanian delegate to the UN who's working on a new peace plan. He was supposed to be flying in from New York on Flight 420. *Now* will you tell me what's happening?"

The security officer swore steadily in an undertone. "That cinches it—we'll be the top story on national TV tonight. If your friend's on 420, Professor, he's in a world of hurting."

"What does that mean?" Loren asked in a loud voice to hide the chill that was beginning to spread over him.

"Flight 420," Captain Stevens said, "was boarded by four men with guns right after it landed, about twenty minutes ago. They ran up the Jetway—that's the movable corridor—out to the plane and took it over before anyone could get out. They let one stewardess go so she could tell us what they're demanding."

"With all your luggage inspections and metal detectors you let *four* armed men—"

"The leader," Stevens cut him off, "was one of my own security officers. The stewardess recognized him." He gestured to the empty departure lounge ahead of them, where a young woman in powder-blue pants suit was sitting on the edge of a plastic swivel seat, talking rapidly and gesturing wildly to two gray-suited faceless men who had FBI written all over them.

"The other three were in security guard uniforms, too," the captain went on, "but we know they were phonies, because the girl remembered the names on their tags and gave them to me and nobody by those names works here. My God, Professor, we can keep any *passenger* with a weapon from boarding a plane but who stops to question guys in airport cops' uniforms? The media are going to slaughter us on this one," he predicted dolefully.

"How much money do they want?" Loren asked.

"Not a damn cent. All they want," the harassed Stevens' voice rose in sheer frustration, "is safe passage out of the country and—and a planeload of dog food!"

After a frenzied phone consultation with the Commis-

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sioner of Police and a rapid briefing from the FBI agent in charge, Loren retraced his steps through the Red Concourse to the central hub. Two minutes with a directory chained between phone booths confirmed his original impression. There was only one dog-food firm in the city—Snap Snap Dog Chunks, Inc. He remembered that a student of his who had graduated a year ago last June now worked in Snap Snap's legal department, a brilliant but erratic student named Ian Bridie. Vietnam veteran, with a deep Scottish burr, thick blond mustache, and wire-rimmed glasses—that was the man Loren wanted to see. He turned and ran for the parking decks.

With the needle quivering at 75 and the city twelve miles south on the Thruway, he adjusted the VW's radio until he found a station that was covering the story. ". . . stewardess released by the skyjackers identified their leader as Joseph Coover, 35, a former Regular Army noncommissioned officer and a member of the airport's security force for the past nineteen months. Let me repeat for those of you who have just tuned in: four armed men have barricaded themselves inside American Airlines Flight 420 from New York and are holding passengers and crew hostage. They have demanded safe passage to Dacca, Bangladesh with a planeload of dog food. According to their ransom note they wish to demonstrate that American policy towards the starving Bengali children is to treat them like dogs. The plane has been ringed by police and all incoming and outgoing flights at City International Airport are subject to extensive delays . . ."

"Who the hell is going to pay us for a planeload of Snap Snap Dog Chunks?" thundered President Poggenburg. He spun his black leather executive swivel chair away from the picture window overlooking the deliveries area three stories below, where diesel engines roared and overalled workmen wheeled hand trucks piled with cases of dog food into the trailers' yawning interiors, while policemen stood huddled in small groups as if waiting for something to happen. "Are you going to pay, Forster?" he demanded of his vice-president who sat tall and aristocratically straight and rubbed his scarf-swathed throat. "Will the city pay?" he shouted at Loren Mensing who stood at the window looking down at the bustle in the yard. "Will the Airlines pay?" he roared at Ian Bridie in a tone presaging the

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roll of a head should the young Scot fail to make someone pay.

"No reason to climb the walls about it, Herbert," soothed the carrot-topped jowly man who had been introduced to Loren as Emery Wilkins, the company's public-relations officer. "Look at it from the positive viewpoint! Look at it as a million dollars' worth of free advertising! Snap Snap will be coming out of the speakers of every radio and TV in the land tonight and if that isn't worth a few truckloads of *dog food I don't know what* is."

Ian Bridie ran his fingers through thick sandy hair and poked a hopelessly weary gaze at Loren through his thick-lensed glasses. "It's been a hellish few days," he muttered to his former professor in a rolling burr. "First the gun battle Saturday morning and now—"

Loren jerked erect and crossed to the lawyer's green plastic chair. "Gun battle? I was out of town over the weekend and didn't see any papers. What happened?"

"Oh, a mere nothing, Professor!" Herbert Poggenburg snorted bullishly. "Just that an armed robber walked into Sutherland's jewelry shop down the block and took all the loose diamonds away with him, but had the poor luck to run out of the store just as a patrol car was cruising by. A gunfight broke out and the thief ran into our lot down below and tried to take refuge in the conveyor-belt shed. The police cut him down in a hail of lead and damaged our whole conveyor system doing it. We couldn't process any dog chunks until this morning when Maintenance finally fixed the master can line after working at it all day and night Sunday. And now some freaks hijack a plane and demand our stock to make some Communistic point that we're not doing enough for the hungry children of the world! My God, what about the hungry *dogs* of the world?"

"Herbert, your blood pressure," cautioned Emery Wilkins in the tone of a governess with an unruly child. Loren threw a glance in Bruce Forster's direction and found the silver-thatched vice-president of Snap Snap fidgeting in his chair and making gestures as if he wanted to say something but couldn't.

"I was here while it was happening," Ian Bridie filled in. "I almost saw the whole thing. I was in the dog suit Saturday morning."

Loren felt as if he had been fed a heavy dinner and then thrust onto a roller coaster. "You," he repeated, very slowly and distinctly, a professor

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making a point in class that he intended to put on the final exam, "were in the dog suit. Would that be the one with the hound's-tooth jacket?"

Bridie slid out of his chair. "If Mr. Poggenburg and Mr. Forster will excuse me a moment, I'll show you Mr. Farff's office and explain." The president having grunted and the vice-president having nodded, the Scot threw open a heavy cedarwood door to an adjoining room and snapped on the overhead fluorescents. "Mr. R. Farff, as I'm sure you know, may be found on every Snap Snap label."

He pointed to the wall above the bare desk where hung the painting of a large alert-looking Dalmation, eyes alight, ears erect, mouth wide in a silent bark. Beneath the polished frame a plaque read:

My name is R. Farff.
My bark is bow wow.
I'm happy my pappy
Made Snap Snap my chow.

Bridie reached into a closet and hauled out a limp and shapeless overall, white with huge black spots, topped with a dog headpiece. "We have groups of schoolchildren touring the plant every so often and the executive staff, all of us who have offices here on the third floor, take turns playing Mr. Farff who's a big hit on children's TV and has raised our sales seventeen percent since Wilkins and the ad agency dreamed him up. Forster was supposed to do it Saturday but he's had laryngitis since late last week, as you saw in there, so I was drafted. I was behind this desk, barking for the kids, when the shooting began."

The young lawyer raised the blind on a side window, revealing several shattered panes of glass. "Some wild shots came in here. Thought I was back in Con Thien for a minute. I got the kids to lie flat on the floor and crawled over to the window to peek out but by then it was all over and I could make out his body lying inside the doorway of the conveyor-belt shed across the yard."

Loren looked diagonally downward through the broken panes. Inside the open doorway of the shed he could make out a network of intersecting chutes and belts, all idle and untended now, the dog-food-making process which they served having been rudely interrupted by the shootout and the skyjacking.

If there is no connection between Saturday morning and today, he said to himself, then the world is abandoned to the Absurd. Aloud he said, "Thanks for the tour. I'd better get back

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down to the truck area and see if anything new came in over the police radio."

"And I suppose I'd better suggest to Poggie and Forster that we let the crew go and tell the night shift to stay home," Bridie sighed. "Until this is over they'll just be sitting around with their ears glued to transistor radios and I see no sense in paying them for that."

Loren looked at his former student curiously.

"And dinna be thinkin' of me as an ethnic stereotype," Bridie suddenly lapsed into an outrageous comic exaggeration of his own accent. "Ye wouldna deny we'll now have to save every cent we can, would ye?"

Loren was unsurprised, having encountered specimens of the Scot's bizarre humor before, usually buried in the middle of a brilliant exposition of some legal point in an examination paper.

"Give my regards to Mr. Farff," Loren replied lamely.

The last of the Snap Snap trailer trucks roared out of the lot with the last of the police cars in its wake, siren shrieking. Loren paced up and down the raised concrete loading platform. Sergeant Charles Hough sat hunched on an empty dolly, chin cupped in hands, lugubrious-faced as ever, and watched Loren's pointless striding.

"And that's all I remember from reading the report yesterday," the sergeant concluded, his recital having added only a few scraps to what Loren already knew about the Sutherland jewel robbery. "Except that the dead man was identified through his prints as Karl Rasor, a former major in the Green Berets who was forced out of the service in one of the cutbacks. No criminal record on him at all, but we've had a couple dozen unsolved armed robberies in this part of the state over the past few years, one- or two-man jobs most of them, and some of the boys think a few might have been pulled by him. I know a lot of vets are having a hard time getting jobs, but, my God, turning thief isn't the answer."

Loren was about to ask Hough why a murderer in uniform was more acceptable than a thief in civvies but another thought struck him before he could speak. He stood against a pillar of the platform's roof, thinking furiously, the twilight wind tugging at his coat.

"It's the dog food," he muttered. "It's 'The Adventure of the Six Napoleons' all over again but this time with six thousand little Bonapartes instead of a half dozen. It's got to be."

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"Are you all right, Professor?" Hough asked in a tone of mild alarm.

"Just before he was killed," Loren continued, louder now, more sure of himself, "Rasor ran into the conveyor-belt shed. He must have had a chance to drop some or all of the stolen diamonds onto one of the can lines before the police shot up the machinery. I asked a few questions in the production department inside a few minutes ago and learned that there's some kind of magnet built into the can lines that weeds out what they call 'tramp metal' that may have gotten onto the conveyor; but of course loose diamonds aren't metal, so that wouldn't stop them. Somewhere in the last of the dog food to get processed Saturday morning is a bunch of diamonds! Rasor's partners figured out what must have happened and set up this crazy skyjack scheme in order to get hold of the company's entire supply on hand and sift through it later at their leisure."

Sergeant Hough did not react to this brainstorm as Loren had expected. His long mournful-eyed face did not light up with awed comprehension but darkened and shook with uncontrollable laughter.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I couldn't help myself," Hough finally managed to articulate through gasps of hilarity. "But, my gosh, what beautiful castles in the air you intellectuals can build! Except there's only one thing wrong with yours."

Loren fought a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Every single diamond Rasor grabbed was found on his body and recovered. Sutherland identified 'em all Saturday afternoon and they're in the police property vault right now."

Loren had dropped the sergeant off at the curb and was about to turn the VW into the Headquarters parking lot when he was seized by a second solution. Frozen behind the steering wheel he turned the notion around under the light of his mind's eye like a lapidary examining a doubtful stone. When the angry blasts of auto horns behind him thrust him back into the real world he swung his car into a U-turn and raced up the darkening street on a beeline for the nearest Thruway entrance.

The VW tore onto the Thruway North and the needle trembled near 75 and the night wind made the small car shudder. The miles rolled under his wheels as he drove mechanically, his mind occupied with what this time had to be the right answer.

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The dog food had absolutely nothing to do with it. This was not a skyjacking or a diamond hunt but an attempted political assassination, planned by an airport security guard, a man who would know official anti-hijack tactics as well as he would know his own name. It was a brilliant plot to maneuver the police and FBI into a shootout during which Noor Mohyeddin, the UN diplomat with the new plan for peace in the Middle East, would conveniently and inevitably be a victim. Whatever terrorist group was behind the plot—Fatah, Black September, any of a half dozen others—would succeed in its purpose of keeping the Mid-East cauldron aflame, and the American government would once again be seen in the eyes of the world as a savage and murderous animal. Unless Loren could keep the authorities from opening fire.

He raced the VW into the airport grounds, slammed to a halt in a taxi space in front of the terminal, and pounded past the line of ticket counters, through knots of crawling passengers and into the central hub of the building, and past the revolving luggage carousels.

And then suddenly he stopped.

A man was walking toward him, a man with an aged wrinkled brown face atop a spare slight body. The man was tugging at a battered black suitcase that seemed too heavy for him. The gentle face was fringed by gray mustache and straggly gray beard and by sparse gray locks under a black fez. Loren stood paralyzed in his tracks as if he had just seen the face of Medusa.

"Mohyeddin!" he croaked.

"Ah!" The frail figure scuttled forward, dragging the suitcase. "You are, eh, Menzink, not so? We met in Geneva, the World Law Association conference since four years—"

"What are you doing here?" Loren blustered.

The Jordanian's face crinkled in puzzlement. "But your university *invited* me here!"

"No, no, I meant what are you doing *here*? You're supposed to be on Flight 420, the one that was hijacked when it landed at 2:40."

"Ah." Now Mohyeddin's seamed leathery face lit with understanding. "No, no, I flew on Flight 240 which was due to land at 4:20! The secretary at my delegation who called your dean, she has jarbled the message, not so? Ah, I am so sorry you have wait since 2:40 but all the arrivals have been hours delayed by your trouble here, everything how-you-say

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stacked up, waiting to land in part of airport where no trouble."

Strike two, Loren heard a voice inside him say.

"I have bag now," the diplomat gestured at the travel-worn black suitcase, "so we can go to hotel."

"I regret a thousand times," Loren said, "but I must put you in a cab to the city and remain here myself a while. I'm sorry."

"But why must you do such a thing?" Mohyeddin asked puzzledly.

"To save some lives, I hope," Loren said.

"Then stay here," Mohyeddin said. "I will arrive to hotel myself. And shall I see you at symposium tonight?"

"If I live that long," Loren said, and shook hands and sped away.

At the western end of the central hub the entranceway to the Red Concourse was blocked by a phalanx of police. Loren showed his credentials and was admitted to the corridor, now an echoing narrow tunnel dotted with empty departure lounges. Stars glistened coldly through the panoramic windows. Halfway up the concourse he began to pass uniformed men, all carrying sidearms, many with rifles or tear-gas launchers or submachine guns.

As he came closer to Gate 39 the plainclothes officials began to thicken, some clustered in departure lounges conferring anxiously, some pacing fretfully up and down the walkway. Everyone seemed on edge, waiting for some signal. Mensing picked out the hard-gutted figure of Captain Stevens and made for him.

"What's been happening?" Loren asked.

"The last truck finished loading its dog food on the plane ten minutes ago," the security chief reported. "The passengers and crew are still aboard. They're waiting for clearance from the flight control tower. We'll be retracting the Jetway any minute now. FBI's got the plane surrounded and there's a possibility the agent in charge is going to order them to shoot out the tires as it's taxiing down the runway."

"My God, what about the safety of the passengers?" Loren almost shouted.

"It's only a possibility, he hasn't made up his mind yet," Stevens grunted. "But you don't have to worry, Professor. If FBI sharpshooters aim at the tires they won't hit no passengers a dozen feet above the ground."

Loren was about to point out in anything but a detached

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professorial tone that the danger to the passengers came not from the sharpshooters but from the possibility of a crash and the unpredictability of the skyjackers' reaction to having the plane's tires shot out from under them. He opened his mouth but suddenly he closed it again. His mind had begun whirling once more and he was lost in his private interior labyrinth.

Something had clicked—no, everything had clicked—and he thought he saw the pattern. But you were on the brink of making a fool of yourself twice in the past hour, the voice inside warned him. Stay out of it, you could be wrong again. And another voice asked him, But if you do shut up and it turns out you were right this time, how many innocent lives will be lost?

He took a long gulp of the chill-conditioned air. Then he turned back to Stevens. "Let's find the FBI agent in charge," he said.

Uncomfortably he squatted on the red carpet of the movable corridor. Ahead of him, around a very slight bend, the grimly closed door into the plane. Behind him, backs pressed against the corrugated wall, two FBI men. Loren mopped his streaming face with a sleeve and lifted the bullhorn.

"Coover!" he bellowed into the mouthpiece. His roar echoed in the enclosed corridor. "Coover!" he repeated.

The airplane door opened outward a few inches and the muzzle of an automatic pistol stuck out. Loren was suddenly very conscious of what a temptingly large target he made.

"Listen to me for two minutes," Loren said into the bullhorn. "Will you listen?"

No answer. The pistol muzzle remained where it was, trained on him. Loren proceeded to speak into the bullhorn, trying to cover his nervousness, trying to capsulize in words as coherent as he could make them as much of the truth as he knew.

Then he was silent, and the seconds crept. It seemed to him that civilizations might have risen and fallen during the time that passed in chill silence after he had finished. By his watch nearly five minutes had elapsed.

Then the steel door opened wider. The automatic pistol was tossed out into the movable corridor, thudding near Loren's feet. A second, third, fourth weapon bounced out in the wake of the first. Four men in airport security guard uniforms emerged slowly from the cabin, their hands high.

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Loren, drained and exhausted from the tension, almost collapsed. What kept him going was the knowledge that the case was far from over.

He crouched shivering in the inky shadows of the shed, staring out at the network of intersecting steel belts, waiting. Next to him he felt the bulk of Sergeant Hough. Motes of milky light filtered in from the neon-dotted lot outside. Night sounds drifted through the dank mist.

Then another noise, not of the night. The barely audible slap of cautious footsteps. Irregular, desperate to remain unheard. Loren tensed, waited for the figure to cross the threshold of the shed. The figure moved fluidly, showing himself against the lighter darkness of the doorway only for a split second. He moved like an infantryman on night patrol in hostile terrain.

Loren watched the man drop to his knees in front of the belt nearest the entranceway, run frantic hands over the clammy metal undercarriage of the conveyor, fingers flying over the steel.

"Hit the light," Hough whispered, and Loren cut upward with the flat of his hand against the switch and the great barnlike shed blazed with harsh light. Hough drew his pistol, raced toward the dazed figure. "Freeze!" he shouted. "Bend over that conveyor, hands on the far edge, fast!"

Three uniformed men converged on the doorway from other corners of the shed, circling the trapped figure.

"We found it half an hour ago," Hough told the intruder. "You are under arrest for attempted burglary, conspiracy to commit armed robbery, conspiracy to hijack an airplane, and about ninety other things we'll charge you with in due time. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to be represented—"

As Hough went through the Miranda litany, Loren was almost tempted to tell him it was unnecessary since the prisoner already knew his rights quite well, having learned them in class from Loren himself.

"Ah, what's the use? I'm done," muttered Ian Bridie.

The electric clock above the stage of the law-school auditorium showed 1:15 A.M. The room was empty, the Middle East symposium had long since ended, but Loren and Noor Mohyeddin sat side by side on red-cushioned seats in the front row, talking.

". . . It had struck me that there were a lot of former

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military people in this affair. Coover, the leader of the hijack team, was described on the radio as a former career sergeant; Rasor, the dead jewel thief, was an ex-major of Green Berets; Bridie, who saw Rasor's death, was a Vietnam veteran. That in itself proved nothing, of course; the country's full of veterans.

"But then I remembered something far more significant—the so-called wild shots that had gone through the third-floor window of the Snap Snap offices Saturday morning. Wild shots? Hitting *three stories above* any possible target? Ridiculous. No one involved in the gun battle on the ground at the Snap Snap plant would have shot at anything so high above any possible target. That is, if he was shooting at a target.

"But what other possible purpose could the shots have had? The only answer I could come up with was that they were a signal. A signal to whom, conveying what message? Well, the only adult anywhere near enough to qualify was Ian Bridie, who like Rasor was a recent veteran.

"The shots could have been Rasor's desperate way of signaling Bridie 'I'm trapped, watch where I hide the diamonds,' except that all diamonds had been recovered from Rasor's body, none had ever been hidden. So it had to be something else that had been hidden. When Sergeant Hough and I searched the area of the conveyor-belt shed visible from the window of Mr. Farff's office we found it, stuck into a groove in the underslinging of a belt.

"It was a set of Army dog tags with the location and number of a safe-deposit box scratched into the surface by a knife blade. We know now what was in the box—over $300,000 in loot from the group's robberies.

"Thanks to a few confessions we can reconstruct most of the picture. Rasor, Coover, Bridie, and the others were in the same battalion in Vietnam. They got out, went their separate ways, happened to reconnect back here, and decided to use their military skills in a civilian occupation, namely armed robbery. They worked in teams of one, two, or three men per job, depending on the nature of the job and on their regular work schedules.

"Rasor, the leader, kept the bulk of the loot in a place of concealment known only to him. Then he got unlucky in the Saturday morning robbery. Bridie had been slated to pull that one with him but because of Forster's laryngitis he pulled

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the dog-suit duty at the last minute, leaving Rasor to tackle Sutherland's alone. When he saw he was trapped, Rasor fought his way down the block to the Snap Snap plant, fired at the single lighted room on the executive floor to attract Bridie's attention, and hid his dog tags under the conveyor line where Bridie could see him but the policemen couldn't. Then he died in a burst of gunfire, loyal to his troops to the last.

"At this point Bridie hatched a screwy but brilliant idea. One: tell the others in the unit that Rasor had tossed the dog tags onto the conveyor belt—beyond the magnet that weeds out 'tramp metal'—and that the tags were mixed in with the day's output of dog food.

"Two: get them to pull the hijack, making use of Coover's security-guard job, as a way of obtaining all available cans of Snap Snap dog chunks, which they could sort through later. Not a Herculean job as Bridie outlined it, because there's a code on each can that indicates the day of canning and they'd only have to sift through the ones bearing Saturday's code.

"Bridie was hoping, of course, that there would be a bloodbath at the airport and that all his buddies would be wiped out, leaving him alone to enjoy the accumulated loot.

"And three: use the skyjacking as an excuse to get the plant shut down for a few hours of darkness so that he could sneak back and retrieve the tags for himself.

"The plan was full of risks, full of holes, but brilliant in a crazy way, just like Bridie's work in law school. Fortunately I had worked out enough of it to convince the hijackers that Bridie had set them up for patsies and that they'd be better off to surrender."

"A strange wild tale," mused Noor Mohyeddin, rubbing his whiskered chin. "I do not follow all you said, but enough. You Americans are—you will pardon me?—such a peculiar people. To acquire, to compete, to prey upon yourselves and others—for these things you live. When will you become a nation of human beings?"

"Who will teach us?" Loren asked.

"Q"

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We welcome a new writer, Madelyn Shepperd, to the pages of EQMM. This is not her first story—she has been published before. Her story is a contemporary "slice of life" that reveals the other side of the coin. Yes, there's always another side—something we tend to forget these disadvantaged days . . .

THE LUCKY STONE

by MADELYN SHEPPERD

"Hey, Lalo. C'mere."

"Yeh, shrimp, c'mere."

A rush of blood hit the boy's temples. He spun around, glared at the two half hidden in the shadowed doorway. Mendez filled most of it. Rico, hands in purple satin pockets, sprawled across the step, his stick legs blocking the sidewalk. Above the street a train rumbled past and plummeted into the tunnel to Grand Central.

Rico split the air with a whistle and jerked his head. "You kicked out again? Who's your old lady got up there now?"

The two broke up laughing.

Lalo opened his mouth, snapped it shut. For a second the anger in his chest hurt worse than the emptiness in his stomach. His fists shoved deeper into the pockets of his tight worn jeans, one hand clenching the lucky mica stone. He kicked hard at a garbage can and a platoon of green flies took off. He swung around then, and swaggered into the street. A car swerved and brakes squealed. But blasting horns hardly broke his pace as he headed for Old Joe's market.

His reflection jumped from store window to store window—a small boy with a crop of wiry matted hair, a walk that rolled him up onto his toes and made him look as though he was always ready to spring.

By the time he got to the next block the ache in his stomach was pushing him even faster, along the buildings grayed now by dusk. Last time, he remembered, Old Joe's hand had clamped down on him like a ton of trouble and Old Joe had threatened to call the cops.

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But the old man still put fruit baskets outside.

Lalo rounded the corner and darted into a doorway. Halfway down the block he spied Old Joe in front of the store, his pudgy arms crossed on white-aproned paunch.

In the shadows Lalo jiggled back and forth anxiously. Light from inside the store slashed across the baskets, turned the oranges into small suns. The red apples glowed and made his mouth water. He fingered the jagged stone, took it out and turned it to catch a glitter of light, then held it to his cheek. It was warm. He peered from his hiding place. The old man was gone.

Lalo slid from the shadows, sidled from doorway to doorway against the buildings, the bricks snagging at his shirt and pricking his back. When he got next to the store he drew a sharp breath and licked his lips. The apples seemed to grow redder and redder. All he could think about was the sweet-tart taste in his mouth, the juice sliding down his chin.

Then, with the speed of a lizard's tongue, Lalo was beside the baskets.

A shadow fell across him.

His glance shot up. The old man's lips were a thin straight line. But he didn't say a word. It was all in his eyes.

Lalo turned and ran, up the street, around the corner, darting between two speeding cars, zigzagging past people, into an alley, down to its end where walls met. He fell against a wall panting and sank down, drew up his knees and pressed them hard against his chest, against the hungry ache in his stomach. His eyeballs burned. Tears sprang up and he ground at them with his fist. But finally he put his head on his knees and let them go.

Out on the street footsteps moved past. Cars revved by. Shadows became night. The blind alley became black.

Lalo's sobs quieted.

He got up, wiped his sleeve across his face, and wandered out. Now the street lights were on. A chill wind whipped in from the river. He hunched his shoulders, pulled up his shirt collar, shoved his hands into his pockets, and rubbed his lucky stone. A woman came hurrying down the street.

"Hey, lady, you got a quarter?" His voice was raspy, his throat felt raw.

She paused and scowled down. "Go home and wash your dirty face!"

The spit formed in his mouth. But he pressed it with his tongue and swallowed it. Then dejectedly he walked on until he reached a vacant lot,

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stumbled over an old hub cap, and kicked it around. A dirty rag flapped in a gust of breeze. He grabbed it and dashed into the street to a long black car that had stopped for the red light.

Lalo reached toward the glass. "Clean the windshield, mister?"

"Hey!" Anger crossed the driver's face. "Get your dirty paws off." The engine revved. The car jolted and Lalo leaped away. He stood watching the dirty rag blow down the street. A sharp whistle blasted. And he spun around.

"What's the matter, kid? Still hungry?" The Mendez face split into a grin, and Lalo knew the two had been following him.

Mendez leered down at him and his eyes picked away like the eyes of a fat rat.

"You wanna get a buck, kid?" The rat eyes slid over to Rico.

"Yeh. A whole buck. All for yourself."

"From you guys?"

"Kinda."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch."

Rico's palms fanned. "We're just nice guys. We'll help you get it."

Lalo kicked an imaginary pebble.

"Okay, kid. Forget it. No sweat." Mendez jerked his head and the two turned and started away.

Lalo felt empty to his knees. A violent hiccup belched up. "Hey, wait!"

"Why?"

"What do I do?"

"What you been doin'."

"It didn't work."

Mendez slid his hands into his back pockets and the pants seams strained. His head jutted forward. "This time we'll pick the pigeon. His own block, too. All you do is beg the buck. That's it." His eyebrows lifted.

Lalo hung on hard to his stone. "That's all?"

A shrug passed from one to the other. "If he looks like he ain't comin' across we'll kinda pull up behind."

"You sure that's all?"

"Look, kid." It had the sound of a growl. "We ain't standin' here all night. C'mon, Rico."

"Hey, wait!"

"Make up your mind, shrimp."

Lalo's tongue flicked over his lips. "Okay. Okay if—"

"So, c'mon."

"Yeh. C'mon."

They split around and wedged Lalo between them. When they neared a street light Rico stopped, pulled out a flat bottle. He passed it to Mendez. The dark head flung back with

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a long gurgling sound. Rico took a long swallow, then reached out with the bottle.

"Here, shrimp, warm your belly."

Lalo eyed them warily.

"G'head."

He put the bottle to his mouth. The wine warmed him going down, but it was bitter, too; it choked him and made him cough. Rico yanked the bottle away. The wine spilled and a ragged stain spread across the boy's shirt. He mopped at it with his sleeve and ran to catch up.

The street they finally turned into was new to Lalo. No trains rumbled to kill sound. No stinking garbage spilled from buildings to gutter. Shiny cars lined the curb. City noises only sifted in from outside.

Ahead, a solitary man came down a grille-railed stairway onto the sidewalk. Toward them.

Mendez nodded to Rico and they moved into the shadows.

"Him." Rico gave Lalo a shove.

Lalo's glance darted up, but their faces were lost in the dark.

"Go on." It was the Mendez growl.

Slowly Lalo moved, fell into his rolling gait, nearer to the glaring street light, nearer to the man. He licked his lips, took out his stone, and let the street light flicker from it. The man was close now. Lalo clutched the stone till it hurt his hand. The man was only steps away. Lalo slowed. Stopped.

"Mister, can you gimme a buck?"

"A buck?" The man looked startled, then amused. "Fifty cents won't do?"

Lalo shook his head.

"Have the panhandling rates escalated? What's it for?"

"I'm—" Lalo hesitated. The man was smiling. This was a new kind of person to him. He began to wish the two weren't behind him, somewhere in the dark. His fist rubbed across his stomach and a hollow sound bubbled up. "I'm hungry."

The man's brows drew together. "Where do you live?"

Lalo shifted from one foot to the other, glanced over his shoulder uneasily.

The man was watching him. "Can't you go home?"

Lalo put the lucky stone to his lips, shook his head again.

The watching eyes left him and swept around the dark street, came slowly back and settled on Lalo's face. He saw the man start to draw out his wallet. Lalo could hear his own heartbeat.

"You know, somehow I believe—" The man's glance shot up, over Lalo's head.

The same instant Lalo heard

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the double footfalls behind him. The man's smile wiped away. Horror bulged his eyes. His mouth opened.

Lalo swung around. "It's okay, guys, he—" Lalo stopped. In Rico's hand the light had caught the flash of a blade, a long pointed blade rising in the air. Rico and the knife moved together. Lalo was only a split second behind. With one terrible leap he was between the knife and the man. And all the emptiness in his stomach exploded into a hot wild flame.

There wasn't a sound. Then:

"Jeez. . ."

"Jeez!"

Running footsteps.

"Oh, my God!"

The sidewalk pressed against him, cold against pain, cold against his cheek. Stone. His hand was empty. A shout slashed the night. Voices. Footsteps ran through them. Lalo tried to open his eyes. A shaft of light quivered just past him.

His stone lay near his hand and he tried to move his fingers toward it. Legs shifted, feet shuffled in the haze beyond. A hand touched him, turned him. Voices. More voices.

"Good Lord, man, you were lucky."

"Yes."

"Smell his breath. Look at the shirt!"

"I'm afraid he's pretty bad."

"Dirty little wino, decoying for those punks."

"He said he was hungry." The words sounded sad.

The hurt inside Lalo was worse now than the hunger. Far off a siren cried. With a desperate effort he turned his head. The mica glowed. Then someone kicked it and the lucky stone was gone.

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a *NEW* crime story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Readers of EQMM do not have to be reminded that Florence V. Mayberry is a gifted writer. Every one of her stories bears her individual stamp, and it's hard to believe that any of them could have been written by someone else (perhaps the ultimate test). Now, in her most recent story, she reaches a new height—at least, a different height—a quality of sheer eeriness and horror unmatched in her previous work . . . "a queer prickly nervousness crawling over my skin" . . .

IN THE SECRET HOLLOW

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

I can't seem to remember the name of that London theater. Not even that night I went there. It was the one where *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie played so long, maybe it's still playing; maybe when the world is ended, and all the people are gone, it will still be playing. No, that won't work. I mean, the play will need people in it, scared mousy people to be the mice. That's what a mousetrap is for. Mice.

I love London. Even before Tommy took me to see it six years ago, so we could be married in his favorite city, I loved it as much as he did. Those stories about Sherlock Holmes, I began reading them when I was eight or nine and I was never sure whether it was Holmes and Dr. Watson or just London that I loved. Later all those other stories with London as the background, including some Tommy wrote himself—he writes beautiful, scary mystery stories, and some of them sell. Anyway, I love London. It's such a lovely place to read about with sinister figures skulking through yellow fog, bobbies thudding out of mists. Fagins and Oliver Twists all over the place.

The night I went to see *The Mousetrap* there wasn't any fog. Just a clear chilly night. Still, it

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had its own special feel, that night, one you could touch, fondle, possess. Like a soft old shoe made of finest leather and handsewn. But down in its toe was a secret doorway, an Alice in Wonderland doorway; and when its key was found and the doorway opened, mystery was waiting.

It was a game to play, searching for that secret doorway. Touch and fondle London, and perhaps the key would fall into my hand. Then I would find Tommy. He was hiding in London. I knew it. Playing his own game—he loves games, he was the one who taught me to play games. Like the night back in San Francisco when we played hide-and-seek. Only, poor Tommy, he never came to find me.

It was too sad to think about San Francisco. So I stopped. Pretended it went away, who knows where, anywhere, and nothing was real except the two days I had been in London looking for Tommy. Would he be around this corner, or that? Inside this store, or another? At Buckingham Palace or Madame Tussaud's? Or on one of those red doubledecker buses?

That's it! That's what he'd like, I said to myself. Don't take a taxi to the theater, take a bus with lots of people for him to hide behind. I asked the hotel doorman what bus went near the theater, then ran up the street and caught it.

Tommy wasn't on the bus. I looked everywhere, and he wasn't anywhere. A woman with a little pinched face and a big hat with daisies on it looked lonely, so I sat beside her. "I wish Tommy *had* been here," I said to her. "But it doesn't hurt to wish, does it, even if it doesn't come true? It's fun while you're wishing, isn't it?"

She stared a moment, then asked softly, "Do you wish, too? That's a comfort. To know there are others." Then she ducked her face into her coat collar, jumped up, and scurried off the bus like a little mouse. I wished she had stayed, to help me find Tommy. But probably she was already looking for someone else.

The man walking around the crowded square near where I got off the bus, with a tray hanging from his neck, was looking for people, too. To buy the little toy dogs he had on the tray. He set one of them on the pavement for me, and the darling thing walked. So I bought it and gave it back to him so it wouldn't be lonely without the others. "I wish you'd help me, I'm lost," I told him. "I don't see *The Mousetrap* anywhere."

"Mousetrap? Not here, lydy,

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it's only dogs I've got. And no shops nearby for mousetraps." He cocked his head and grinned. "By the look of you, it's Harrods you'll want. Likely they'll have a gold one set with jools for you."

"Not a real mousetrap. It's a play called *The Mousetrap.* A mystery play. Even the theater's a mystery because I can't find it."

"Well, you've found Old Jim," he said. "It's wonderful the w'y everyone in trouble finds me. Something tells them, go look up Old Jim, he's been in trouble himself so he'll know how to set you right. Follow me, dearie. No time at all you'll be sitting there at your play with chills up your back."

We marched like a parade around the square, Old Jim asking right and left, "*The Mousetrap*, lads, where's *The Mousetrap?*"

He stopped before a tall elegant woman with pale hair. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, but this little lydy's looking for *The Mousetrap.* Not to catch mice, mind you, it's a pl'y in a theater we can't find. Would you be going there yourself? Show her the w'y?" Apologetically he added, "She's American y'know. Don't know her w'y about."

The blonde woman smiled. "Neither do I. I'm a stranger too, Swedish. And I'm visiting my daughter in the country, we're just in for the evening. But perhaps all of us together can find the theater for you."

She took my hand, and hers was warm and cozy. "Your hand is so cold," she said. "And your wrap—it's beautiful, but are you sure it is sufficiently warm for London nights? Oh, please, sir—" She stopped a tall man, young and handsome. "One moment, please, will you help this American lady find the theater where *The Mousetrap* is playing?"

But I had already dropped her hand and gone to him. Put my hands on his shoulders, stood on tiptoe, kissed his chin. "Hello, Tommy," I said.

He stepped back quickly. I stumbled forward, my hands grasping at his lapels. "Sorry," he said. "Awf'ly sorry. Some mistake. I mean—well, really—" And he darted away.

"What will I do?" I asked the Swedish lady. "It wasn't Tom again. For two days, ever since I've been in London, some of them look like Tommy. Then they always turn out not to be."

"Poor dear. You've lost someone?" She patted my hand, put her arm around my shoulders. "Are you certain you're warm enough? Perhaps you could change your ticket,

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come another night with a warmer wrap."

"For a minute he looked like Tom. With the hat covering his hair. Tommy's hair shines, it's golden red. No, I have to go to the theater, Tommy may be there. He writes mysteries, you know, so he's sure to go to Agatha Christie's play."

"Then we must find it." Old Jim was gone, back in the crowd again. She spoke to the young couple beside her, the girl as blonde and tall as herself. "We must find a theater for this American lady."

"Perhaps I can find a cabbie, he'll take me to the theater."

But there wasn't a cabbie in sight, only people milling about. The young couple grew restless, impatient, whispering to each other. "Don't worry, I'll find *The Mousetrap*," I told my Swedish friend. "Someone will know."

"I will worry."

"Please don't. I found you, didn't I? I'll find someone else."

"That's the difficulty. And he may not be your Tommy. I really wish I could stay with you." She leaned forward and kissed me lightly. "Take care, little one. Do you know your eyes are the color of the North Sea? Not cold, but that same deep molten gray. Not cold, dear, beautiful."

Tommy liked my eyes, too. When we first met he said they were like shadows with the sun hiding behind them. Later, after we were married, he said no, not shadows, they held too much movement for shadows. Their gray was always changing, shifting color, scurrying about like millions of little gray mice running to hide, only they couldn't get away. That's when he stopped calling me Virginia. Called me Mousie. His darling Mousie.

The Swedish lady left with the young couple and I turned down a narrow street looking for *The Mousetrap*.

I passed a restaurant, dim lights shining through murky windows outlining its sign *HAMBURGERS*. It was delightful, it made me laugh to find an American lunch counter in this tucked-away fragment of London. Then I remembered I was hungry, I hadn't eaten since breakfast, walking and searching all day. I turned back and went in.

Inside it wasn't American, it was London. Absolutely lovely. Two men in splotched white aprons talking in cockney accents, one at the counter, the other cooking. Talking to each other, because I was the only customer.

The hamburger was so un-American, so charred and dry, I

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had to laugh again. After that I couldn't stop. Laughed and laughed while the two men looked at me kind and careless. Finally the counterman said, "A cuppa tea will help that," and set one before me. Good tea, hot and strong. It stopped the laughing and I was glad, because my insides were beginning to hurt.

"Do you know where *The Mousetrap* is playing?" I asked.

" 'Ow's that? Mousetrap? Pl'ying? Oh, you mean the pl'y no one's to tell the end of. Not far, lydy. Across the street, down a bit past a posh restaurant. Keep on, look to your right, and there it is. Never went to the pl'y myself but I heard you're not to tell the end of it afterwards, takes away the fun for others coming later."

"Maybe there isn't an end, that's why they can't tell it," I said. "Maybe it just keeps on and on, with no end, and that's the secret nobody's to tell, that it never stops, that's why it's been running all those years. It would be a good joke, don't you think? Have you seen my Tom? He loves hamburgers, he'd be sure to come in if he passed by."

The counterman's face remained kind, but it tightened. As though he had put a drawstring around it, pulled it a bit, and was ready to pull more. He looked at the cook. "You see Tom?"

" 'Ow's that? Tom who?"

"Tom Riordan. My husband. He's not in Los Angeles, or Madrid, or Paris. I looked in all those places. So he's certain to be here. We were married in London, you know, I should have looked here first. But there was that trip we'd planned. Madrid, then Paris, then London. Los Angeles first, because he'd sold a story to television there. But I didn't find him, so he's in London. And he's sure to go see *The Mousetrap*—he writes mystery stories, you know."

"I'd never run out on a girl who looked like you," the cook said. "Maybe he's 'urt someplace. Where did you last see him?"

"In his coffin. Back in San Francisco, where we live."

The cook's face got loose. It was so funny I had to struggle not to laugh again, his face so loose and the waiter's getting tighter.

"You see, it was another story he was writing. Seeing how it would be like to be dead. But when I got into the coffin he wasn't there. So I went to the funeral parlor. Tommy loves funeral parlors—he goes to them and watches funerals. For his stories, you know. But he wasn't there. He

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was just gone. And I never wore widow's clothes or wept or found his grave—not anything—so he couldn't be really dead, could he?"

They looked at each other. "That's something to think on," the waiter said. "P'raps 'e's home by now. Waiting up for you. Ever think of that?"

I shook my head. "No. I telephoned. The maid said—" But it was too terrible to repeat. It was dreadful of her to tell me such a sad thing when I was trying to be happy in London. *Don't you remember, Miss Virginia? He's gone. Don't you remember?*

That's a stupid thing to tell me, I already know that, that's why I'm looking for him. He wasn't in the coffin in his study. Nor at the funeral parlor. Nor at the cemetery, none of the graves had his name on them.

Miss Virginia, please tell me where you are, stop thinking about Mr. Tom, Come—

It was infuriating, so I had told her to shut up. Stubborn, irritating fool! Wouldn't help me find Tommy.

Please come home, Miss Virginia, your brother's half crazy looking for you.

So I hung up.

"Tommy's not home, he's here in London," I told the men. "Hiding, he loves to tease. Teasing is mystery too, isn't it? Never know the truth of teasing until it stops, do you?"

The waiter shook his head. "It's a question, all right. Tell you w'ot, if 'e's not at the theater, you come back and have tea with us, free. You'll need comp'ny."

Such sweet men, real London people, so understanding. I paid my bill, gave them a wave, and headed for *The Mousetrap.*

Across the way, down the street toward the muted colored sign of the posh restaurant. On to the end of the shadowy street. And there it was. Just past the corner, *THE MOUSETRAP* in lights above its entrance. A quiet, dingy little theater on the outside, hiding goodies inside the way the English like to do it. And the goody would be Tommy! My wonderful redhaired wild Tommy!

"Has Tommy come yet?" I asked the girl in the ticket kiosk.

She stared a moment. Then said, "I'm sure I didn't notice, Madam."

"Oh, I wish you had. It's been so long since I've seen him."

"Why don't you just go along inside?" she said. "If he's not there, perhaps he'll come after a bit. They usually do."

I went inside, found my seat,

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and watched the people as they came in. Every one of them. But no Tommy. "Do you suppose my husband is in the play?" I said to the couple beside me. "It could be a trick he's playing—he loves to tease. He might be, mightn't he?"

"Oh, quite," the lady said.

Then the house lights darkened and the play began.

Tommy wasn't in the play. And he wasn't in the audience. I would have known. I would have *felt* him. Besides, who could miss Tommy? Tall, broad-shouldered, and all that shining hair. He was so handsome people always stopped talking or whatever they were doing and stared at him. Then he would smile, and he had such a lovely grin they had to smile back. Yes, I would have known if Tommy had been in the theater.

So I left. Before the play ended. Before I knew what the mystery was, so I'll never be able to tell it to anyone.

The streets were shadowy, not many people about. Up ahead was a two-decker red bus. I ran, but it ran faster. Gone. And Tommy might have been on it.

Then I knew. Just knew. Suddenly. And began shaking all over, a queer prickly nervousness crawling over my skin. Not inside of me, just on the outside. Inside I felt wonderful, because I was feeling Tommy. Right there, with me. Beside me. No, behind me, slipping from one side to the other every time I turned to catch him. Tease!

"Tommy, shame! Making me search half around the world for you. But I knew I'd find you. In London, just as I thought."

I whirled. Fast. But he was too quick for me. Oh, that character! I didn't want to encourage him by laughing, but I couldn't help it. "Tommy, you're dreadful! Oh, not really, Tommy, I love you just as you are, it's really a good joke. To catch me at *The Mousetrap*. Your little Mousie. But I caught you, too, I knew you'd be here."

I kept whirling, laughing, and whirling in the lovely London night, but I couldn't really catch him. How could Mousie catch that lovely big Tom-cat with that shining red hair?

Another bus came along and we ran to catch it. I did, but Tommy missed it. He wasn't with me any more when I sat down inside. I began to cry.

"Mum, what's the trouble?" the girl conductor asked.

"I've lost someone. He didn't get on."

"P'raps you'd like to get off? He won't be far behind."

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Of course he wouldn't be. I began to laugh again. That shameful man, he'd be running beside the bus, dodging out of sight every time I looked out the window. "No, this time I'll tease him," I told her. "He can just run to catch up with me."

"That's the spirit," the girl said, grinning. "Dries the tears fast, that kind of spunk."

The bus didn't turn toward Paddington Station, near where I'd found a hotel, but wheeled around the other side of Hyde Park.

"But my hotel's not this way," I told the man across the aisle. "I suppose I'd better get off."

"Now's as good a time as any," he said. "We all have to get off sooner or later."

So I did. Almost in front of a huge hotel. "I'm thirsty!" I said. Loud. So Tommy could hear if he'd caught up.

He had because he whispered, right in my ear, "Let's go in here. It's one of the best."

Tommy behind, me in front, we went into the hotel's lower entrance. He was doing it again. Leaving all the nuisance arrangements to me. Always doing that. I mean, I don't mind the money part, my brother and I were left plenty of that, and Tommy's stories didn't make much. But I don't like calling people, making reservations, bothering with bills and all those crazy papers lawyers have you sign. "Let Tommy sign them for me," I told my lawyer. But the lawyer said Tommy couldn't. It was my money, not Tommy's. So I fooled him. I signed the checks and gave most of the money to Tommy. Lots of times I didn't have any money and neither did Tommy. Then Tommy made me explain to the bill collectors why we weren't paying our bills. If I hadn't been so glad to have Tommy back I would have been cross because he made me ask the doorman where we could get coffee. "Just coffee. Or"—I turned to Tommy, but he scooted out of sight—"Tommy, would you like a sandwich?"

The doorman waited almost a minute before he answered me, just like everyone was doing back in San Francisco. Finally he said, "Madam, you'd best go upstairs to the library. Coffee is served in the library. Or coffee and sandwiches can be sent to your room."

"My husband and I aren't staying here."

"The library is upstairs, Madam."

I didn't bother with the elevator. I was onto that trick of Tommy's. I would go into one elevator and he'd catch another, and when we got upstairs he'd

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take another down and leave me alone. Lots of times he did that. So we walked up.

"The library, please," I said to a bellman.

"This way, Madam."

Lovely, lovely, that library. Like being inside an English novel. Like one of those old men's clubs where only Dukes and Lords stay. Or retired Army officers. Or something. Old men sunk deep into chairs, papers before their faces, all of them slowly dropping their papers as we came in. As though we'd entered screaming.

Laughter tickled my chest, bubbled in my throat, almost came out but I choked it back. I started to say, "Good evening." But that would have been wrong, like speaking from the audience to the actors on a stage.

The men hid their faces with their papers again and a waiter —no, he must have been a butler, he was so elegant in his swallow-tail coat—came to me. "Do you wish something, Madam?"

He gave me chills, he was so superior and proper, with the expression of a schoolteacher who would smack my palms with a ruler even if I was a girl.

"Coffee, please. Cream for my husband, none for me." Tommy, the fink, wouldn't say a word. "I wish sometimes you'd do the ordering," I whispered to him. "And come sit properly beside me."

"I beg pardon, Madam?"

"I'm just speaking to my husband, sir," I said coldly. I had to tack on that "sir," he was so terrifying.

"Certainly, Madam."

He returned with a silver tray and set it on a low table before the divan. A silver coffee server, two cups beside it, a pitcher of cream, sugar. He poured the coffee, lifted the pitcher, and asked, "How much cream for the gentleman?"

"Just enough for color. No sugar. Mine is black."

He did the cream just right and moved off to one side.

Tommy wouldn't drink his coffee. Because he wasn't there any more. Slipped away. Gone. Probably turned off by that butler.

"Is Madam ill?" the butler asked.

"No. But my husband has left. Now I'll have to look for him all over again."

"Yes, Madam."

I drank my coffee, paid the butler, and he bowed me out.

It was quiet outside, no one around, the night so empty the air seemed hollow. How good it would be, I thought, to crawl into that hollow, as an animal crawls into a hollow log. Curl up. Sleep. Rest.

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Then I knew. That's where Tommy was hiding. In the hollow. Waiting for me to crawl in beside him. "Like you did in San Francisco," I said loudly so he'd be sure to hear. "Crawl in beside you, like in the coffin, and we'll both go to sleep. Only this time nobody will ever find us and take you away."

Tommy laughed. Deep, sweet, man laugh. "Tommy, darling, help me, how do I get inside the hollow?"

"This way!" Across the street. Toward the shops. Harrods?

"Tommy, you're mad! It's night, the shops aren't open."

"Here!" Farther. Always ahead.

"Are you looking for a present for me? Because you went away and left me alone? You don't need to, Tommy, I only need you."

He was above me, slipping ahead, out of reach. Then he vanished into the hollow, leaving behind only an echo of his laugh to ring in my ears. But I had found him out, now I knew where he was. I lifted my feet and climbed after him into the secret hollow.

Tommy slapped me. Hurt terribly. Gritty hand. Ground into me, scraped my face. But that must be the trick of it, that was how one entered the hollow, for Tommy was calling, "Over herehereHEREHERE HERE!"

"Where?"

"HEREHEREHEREHERE HERE—" Over and over, screaming.

"You never wait for me, not even in your coffin, never."

He kept screaming, screaming. Until at last he picked me up and laid me on a white flat coffin. "Are we going to the funeral parlor now, Tommy?"

"Put another blanket over her, she's going into shock." The voice wasn't Tommy's. It belonged to a stranger. Tommy was gone again. I began to cry. Inside of me, not outside with tears, and the tears cried too because they couldn't get out. Then I climbed into the air again and looked for the hollow and Tommy . . .

They had no business doing it. Putting me in a hospital. Just when I had almost reached Tommy. They made me so cross I wouldn't eat. Covered my head with the sheet. "I'm dead," I told them.

Then they did a worse thing. None of their business. They brought in my brother. Ron. Clear from San Francisco. To sit at my bedside and try to pat my hand and tell me lies. You would think that a boy you had been raised with, and who took care of you after your parents

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were dead because he was older, wouldn't tell you lies.

"Virginia, dear, this is Ron." I knew that, why wouldn't I know my own brother's voice? "Listen to me. I've come to take you home. You'll be all right now, safe, I'll see to that. Tommy's out of the way."

"You killed him!" I said through the sheet. "I remember now. You took me out of the coffin and threw him in it. I woke up and saw you. But he's not dead, he's alive. I found him here in London."

"Tommy's not in London, baby."

"He is! He wasn't at the funeral parlor, or in any of the graves. I read all those marble slabs, like dead books. But his name wasn't on any of them."

"You're only remembering part of it, Virginia. Try to remember all of it. So you'll get well, get straight in your mind. Tommy was arrested, can't you remember that, too? Tommy tried to kill you. He gave you an overdose of some drug he was fooling with—experimenting for his stories, he claimed. Had you in that damn coffin he kept in his study. With the lid down and a scarf over your face.

"I came to your house that night, to find out why your account at the bank was continually overdrawn and bill collectors were coming to me for payment. I figured Tommy was using up your money. The maid let me in and I went to his study. He was at his desk, typing. Said he'd been looking all over for you, couldn't find you anywhere. That lately you had been strange, wandering on long walks, disappearing for hours. I started to leave and go find you myself. It gave me the creeps, in there with that damn coffin."

Ron tried to pull the sheet from my face. I hung onto it.

"Virginia, you've got to get it straight. Tommy tried to kill you! If I hadn't noticed a scrap of your scarf caught in the hinge of the coffin lid, I would have left. But by the grace of God I did see it and had a hunch to look in it. I had to unfasten the lid, so you didn't do it by yourself like he said. And when I lifted the lid, there you were. The scarf covering your face. Unconscious from lack of air and that stuff he'd been giving you."

"Shut up!"

He yelled, like through a tunnel, "I won't! So I knocked him into the coffin, called the doctor and the police. Listen, Virginia, you and I have a lot of money. And your will makes him your principal heir. Face it, Virginia, he—"

I shut out Ron's voice. Left him all by himself in that nasty

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hospital room. Slipped away into the secret hollow. "Hi," Tommy said when I got there. "That stinker Ron. Always nosing around, not letting us have fun. But it was a good plot, wasn't it, Mousie? Man gives wife overdose of drugs, brother saves her but wife is still kookie, thinks husband is dead, goes to husband's funeral. Only there isn't any funeral, and no grave. Because she was the one supposed to be dead. Amusing type of murder story, don't you think, Mousie?"

"I looked everywhere for you, Tommy. All over London. Then at *The Mousetrap*, I was sure you'd be there. Only you weren't inside, you were waiting outside." Someone laughed. It wasn't Ron, I'd left him back in the hospital. And it was too shrill to be Tommy. I couldn't blame whoever it was for laughing. Because it was really funny. The way I kept looking for it. And hadn't known all along that of course I would be the one inside it. What else are mousetraps for?

"Q"

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

This is the ninth, and perhaps the last, of the Black Widowers' stories. We sincerely hope it is not the last. The series is scheduled to be published by Doubleday in book form, titled TALES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS, *in late spring of 1974. But there's no reason why Isaac Asimov can't extend the series, and eventually have enough tales for a second volume . . .*

But if it should come to pass that this story relates the final meeting of the Black Widowers, we can tell you the series ends on a high note—on one of the most puzzling problems that ever challenged the collective wits of the Black Widowers Club . . .

(By the way, Isaac Asimov was on the cruise that witnessed, from off the Florida coast, the Apollo moon shot referred to in the story. Mr. Asimov has used the event and cruise background brilliantly.)

THE SIX SUSPECTS

by ISAAC ASIMOV

The monthly banquet of the Black Widowers had reached the point where little was left of the mixed grill except an occasional sausage and a markedly untouched piece of liver on the plate of writer Emmanuel Rubin—and it was then that voices rose in Homeric combat.

Rubin, undoubtedly furious by the serving of liver at all, was saying, even more flatly than was usual for him, "Poetry is *sound*. You don't *look* at poetry. I don't care whether a culture emphasizes rhyme, alliteration, repetition, balance, or cadence, it all comes down to sound."

Roger Halsted, mathematician and composer of limericks,

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never raised his voice, but one could always tell the state of his emotions by the color of his high forehead. Right now it was a deep pink, the color extending past the line that had once marked hair. He said, "What's the use of making generalizations, Manny? No generalization can hold generally without an airtight system of axiomatics to begin with. Literature—"

"If you're going to tell me about figurative verse," said Rubin hotly, "save your breath. That was Victorian nonsense."

"What's figurative verse?" asked artist Mario Gonzalo. "Is he making that up, Jeff?" He added a touch to the tousled hair in his careful caricature of the banquet guest, Waldemar Long, who, since the dinner had begun, had eaten in somber silence, but was obviously following every word.

"No," said Geoffrey Avalon, the patent lawyer, "though I wouldn't put it past Manny to make something up if that were the only way he could win an argument. Figurative verse is verse in which the words or lines are arranged typographically in such a way as to produce a visual image that reinforces the sense. 'The Mouse's Tail' in *Alice in Wonderland* is perhaps the best-known example."

Halsted's soft voice was unequal to the free-for-all and he methodically beat his spoon against a water goblet till the decibels simmered down.

He said, "Let's be reasonable. The subject under discussion is not poetry in general, but the limerick as a verse form. My point is this—I'll repeat it, Manny—that the worth of a limerick is not dictated by its subject matter. It's a mistake to think that a limerick has to be dirty to be good. It's easier—"

James Drake, the organic chemist, stubbed out his cigarette, twitched his small grizzled mustache, and said in his hoarse voice, "Why do you call a dirty limerick dirty? The Supreme Court will get you for that."

Halsted said, "Because it's a two-syllable word with a meaning you all understand. What do you want me to say? Sexual-blasphemous-and-generally-irreverent?"

Avalon said, "Go on, Roger. Make your point and don't let them needle you." And from under his luxuriant eyebrows he frowned austerely at the others. "Let him talk."

"Why?" said Rubin. "He has nothing to— Okay, Jeff. Talk, Roger."

"Thank you all," said Halsted, in the wounded tone of one who has finally succeeded in having his wrongs recognized. "The worth of a

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limerick rests in the unpredictability of the last line and in the cleverness of the final rhyme. In fact, off-color content may seem to have value in itself and therefore require less cleverness —but it produces a less worthwhile limerick. Now it is possible to have the rhyme masked by the orthographical conventions."

"The what?" said Gonzalo.

"Spelling," said Avalon.

"And then," said Halsted, "in seeing the spelling and having that instant of delay in getting the sound, you intensify the enjoyment. But under those conditions you have to *see* the limerick. If you just recite it, the excellence is lost."

"Suppose you give us an example," said Drake.

"I know what he means," said Rubin. "He's going to rhyme M.A. and C.D.—Master of Arts and Caster of Darts."

"That's an example that's been used," admitted Halsted, "but it's extreme. It takes too long to catch on and amusement is drowned in irritation. As it happens, I've made up a limerick while we were having the argument—"

And now for the first time Thomas Trumbull, the code expert, entered the discussion. His tanned and wrinkled face twisted into a dark scowl and he said, "The hell you did. You made it up yesterday and you engineered this whole silly discussion just so you could recite it. If it's one of your *Iliad* limericks, I'll personally—"

"It's not the *Iliad*," said Halsted. "I haven't been working on that recently. It's no use my reciting this one, of course. I'll write it down and pass it around."

He wrote in large block letters on an unused napkin:

YOU CAN'T CALL THE
BRITISH QUEEN MS.
'TAIN'T AS NICE AS
ELIZABETH IS.
BUT I THINK
THAT THE QUEEN
WOULD BE EVEN LESS KEEN
TO HAVE HERSELF
MENTIONED AS LS.

Gonzalo laughed aloud when it came to him. He said, "Sure, if you know that MS is pronounced Miz, then you pronounce LS as Liz."

"To me," said Drake scornfully, "LS would have to stand for 'lanuscript' if it's going to rhyme with MS."

Avalon pursed his lips and shook his head. "Using 'TAIN'T is a flaw. You ought to lose a syllable some other way. And to be perfectly consistent, shouldn't the rhyme word IS be spelled simply S?"

Halsted nodded. "You're

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quite right, and I thought of doing that, but it wouldn't be transparent enough and the reader wouldn't get it fast enough to laugh. Secondly, it would be the cleverest part of the limerick and would make the LS anticlimactic."

"Do you really have to waste all that fancy reasoning on a piece of nonsense like this?" asked Trumbull.

"I think I've made my point," said Halsted. "That humor can be visual."

Trumbull said, "Well, then, let's drop the subject. Since I'm host this session, that's an order. —Henry, where's the dessert?"

"It's here, sir," said Henry softly. Unmoved by Trumbull's tone, the perennial waiter at the Black Widower banquets deftly cleared the table and dealt out the blueberry shortcake.

The coffee had already been poured and Trumbull's guest said in a low voice, "May I have tea, please?"

The guest had a long upper lip and a long chin. The hair on his head was shaggy but there was none on his face and he had walked with a somewhat bearlike stoop. When he was first introduced, only Rubin had registered any recognition.

Rubin had said, "Aren't you with NASA?"

Waldemar Long had answered with a startled "Yes" as though he had been disturbed out of a half-resentful resignation to anonymity. He had then frowned. He was frowning now again as Henry poured the tea, then melted unobtrusively into the background.

Trumbull said, "I think the time has come for our guest to enter the discussion and perhaps add some sense to what has been an unusually foolish evening so far."

"No, that's all right, Tom," said Long. "I don't mind frivolity." He had a deep and rather beautiful voice that had a definite note of sadness in it. He went on, "I have no aptitude for badinage myself, but I enjoy listening to it."

Halsted, still brooding over the limerick, said with sudden forcefulness, "I suggest Manny *not* be the grillmaster on this occasion."

"No?" said Rubin, his sparse beard lifting belligerently.

"No. I put it to you, Tom. If Manny questions our guest, he will surely bring up the space program since there's a NASA connection. Then we will go through the same argument we've had a hundred times. I'm sick of the whole subject of space and whether we ought or ought not to be on the moon."

"Not half as sick of it as I am," said Long, rather unex-

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pectedly. "I'd just as soon not discuss any aspect of space exploration."

The heavy flatness of the remark seemed to dampen spirits all around. Even Halsted was momentarily at a loss for any other subject to introduce to someone connected with NASA.

Then Rubin stirred in his seat and said, "I take it, Dr. Long, that this is a recently developed attitude of yours."

Long's head turned suddenly toward Rubin. His eyes narrowed. "Why do you say that, Mr. Rubin?"

Rubin's small face came as close to a simper as it ever did. "Elementary, my dear Mr. Long. You were on the cruise that went down to see the Apollo shot last winter. I'd been invited as a literary representative, but I couldn't go. However, I got the promotional literature and noticed you were on the cruise. You were going to lecture on some aspect of the space program, I forget which. So your disenchantment with the subject of space must have arisen in the six months since the cruise."

Long nodded his head slightly a number of times and said, "I seem to be more heard of in that connection than in any other in my life. The damned cruise has made me famous, too."

"I'll go farther," said Rubin, "and suggest that something happened *on* the cruise that disenchanted you with space exploration, maybe to the point where you're thinking of leaving NASA and going into some other field of work altogether."

Long's stare was fixed now. He pointed a finger at Rubin—a long finger that showed no sign of a tremor—and said, "Don't play games." Then, with controlled anger, he rose from his chair and said, "I'm sorry, Tom. Thanks for the meal, but I'll go now."

Everyone rose at once, speaking simultaneously—all but Rubin, who remained sitting with a look of stunned astonishment on his face.

Trumbull's voice rose above the rest. "Now wait a while, Waldemar. Damn it, will all of you sit down? Waldemar, you too. What's the excitement about? Rubin, what *is* all this?"

Rubin looked down at his empty coffee cup and lifted it as though he wished there were coffee in it so that he could delay replying by taking a sip. "I was just making like Sherlock Holmes, simply demonstrating a chain of logic. After all, I write mysteries, you know. But I seem to have

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touched a nerve." Then gratefully, he said, "Thanks, Henry," as the cup before him sparkled black to the brim.

"What chain of logic?" demanded Trumbull.

"Okay, here it is. Dr. Long said, 'The damned cruise has made me famous, too.' He said 'too' and emphasized the word. That means it did something else for him and since we were talking about his distaste for the whole subject of space exploration, I deduced that the something else was to supply him with that distaste. From his attitude I guessed it was sharp enough to make him want to quit his job. That's all there is to it. As I said, elementary."

Long nodded his head again, in precisely the same slight and rapid way as before, then settled back in his seat. "All right. I'm sorry, Mr. Rubin. I jumped too soon. The fact is I *will* be leaving NASA. To all intents and purposes I *have* left it—and at the point of a shoe. That's all. —We'll change the subject. Tom, you said coming here would get me out of my dumps, but it hasn't worked that way. Rather, my mood has infected you all and I've cast a damper on the party. Forgive me, all of you."

Avalon put a finger to his neat, graying mustache and stroked it gently. He said, "Actually, sir, you have given us something we like above all things—the opportunity to indulge our curiosity. May we question you on this matter?"

"It's not something I'm free to talk about," said Long guardedly.

Trumbull said, "You needn't mention sensitive details and as far as anything else is concerned, everything said in this room is confidential. And, as I always add when I find it necessary to make that statement, the confidentiality includes our esteemed friend, Henry."

Henry, who was standing at the sideboard, smiled briefly.

Long hesitated. Then he said, "Actually, your curiosity is easily satisfied and I guess that Mr. Rubin, at least, with his aptitude for deduction, has already filled in the details. I'm suspected of having been indiscreet, either deliberately or carelessly, and, either way, I may find myself unofficially, but very effectively, blocked from any future position in my field of competence."

"You mean you'll be blackballed?" said Drake.

"That's a word," said Long, "that's never used. But that's what it will amount to."

"I take it," said Drake, "you were not indiscreet."

"On the contrary, I was." Long shook his head. "I haven't

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denied that. The trouble is they think the story is worse than I admit."

There was another pause and then Avalon, speaking in his most impressively austere tone, said, "Well, sir, *what* story?"

Long passed a hand over his face, then pushed his chair away from the table so that he could lean his head back against the wall.

He said, "It's really so undramatic. I was on this cruise, as Mr. Rubin told you. I was going to give a talk on certain space projects, rather far-out ones, and planned on explaining exactly what was being done in certain fascinating directions. I can't give you *those* details. I found that out the hard way. Some of the stuff had been classified, but I had been told I could talk about it. Then, on the day before I was to give my lecture, I got a radiophone call saying it was all off. There was to be no declassification.

"I was furious. There's no use denying I have a temper and I also have very little gift for extemporaneous or impromptu lecturing. I had carefully written out my talk and had intended to read it. I know that's not a good way of giving a lecture, but it's the best I can do. Now I had nothing left to give to a group of people who had paid considerable money to listen to me. It was a most embarrassing position."

"What did you do?" asked Avalon.

Long shook his head. "I held a rather pathetic question-and-answer session the next day. It didn't go over at all well. It was even worse than just not giving a speech at all. By that time, you see, I knew I was in considerable trouble."

"In what way?" said Avalon.

"If you want the story," said Long, "here it is. I'm not exactly talkative at meals, as you perhaps have noticed, but when I went in to dinner after getting the call, I suppose I put on a passable imitation of a corpse that had died with an angry look on its face. The rest tried to draw me into the conversation if only, I suppose, to keep me from poisoning the atmosphere. Finally one of them said, 'Well, Dr. Long, what will you be talking about tomorrow?' And I blew up and said, 'Nothing! Nothing at all! I've got the paper all written out and it's sitting there on the desk in my cabin and I can't give it because I just found out the material is still classified.' "

"And then the paper was stolen?" said Gonzalo.

"No. Why steal anything these days? It was photographed."

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"Are you sure?"

"I was almost sure at the time. When I got back to my cabin after dinner the door was not locked and the papers had been moved. Since then it's become certain. We have proof that the information has leaked."

There was a rather depressed silence at that. Then Trumbull said, "Who could have done it? Who heard you?"

"Everyone at the table," said Long despondently.

Rubin said, "You have a voice that carries, Dr. Long, and if you were as angry as I think you were, you spoke forcefully. Probably a number of people at adjoining tables heard you."

"No," said Long, shaking his head. "I spoke through clenched teeth, not loudly. Besides, you don't realize what the cruise was like. The cruise was badly undersubscribed, you see—poor promotion, mostly. It was carrying only forty percent capacity and the shipping company is supposed to have lost a packet."

"In that case," said Avalon, "it must have been a dreary experience apart from your misadventure."

"On the contrary, up to that point it was very pleasant for me, and it continued to be very pleasant for all the rest, I imagine. The crew nearly outnumbered the passengers, so the service was excellent. All the facilities were available without crowding. They scattered us through the dining room and gave us privacy. There were seven of us at our dining table. Lucky seven, someone said at the beginning." For a moment Long's look of grimness deepened. "None of the tables near us was occupied. I'm quite certain that nothing any of us said was heard anywhere but at our own table."

"Then there are seven suspects," said Gonzalo thoughtfully.

"Six, since you needn't count me," said Long. "I knew where the paper was and what it contained."

"You're under suspicion, too. Or you implied that," said Gonzalo.

"Not to myself," said Long.

Trumbull said peevishly, "I wish you'd come to me with this, Waldemar. I've been worrying over your obviously anxious attitude for months."

"What would you have done if I had told you?"

Trumbull considered. "Damn it, I'd have brought you here. —All right. Tell us about the six other people at the table. Who were they?"

"One was the ship's doctor —a good-looking Dutchman in an impressive uniform."

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Rubin said, "He would be. The ship was one of the Holland-American liners, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The officers were Dutch and the crew—the waiters, stewards, and so on—were mostly Indonesian. They'd all had three-month cram courses in English, but we communicated mostly in sign language. I can't complain, though—they were pleasant and hard-working and all the more efficient since there were considerably less than the usual number of passengers."

"Any reason to suspect the doctor?" asked Drake.

Long nodded. "I suspected them all. The doctor was a silent man; he and I were the two silent ones. The other five made continuous conversation, much as you do here at this table. The doctor and I listened. What I've brooded about in connection with him was that it was he who asked me about my talk. Asking a personal question like that was not characteristic."

"He may have been worried about you medically," said Halsted. "He may have been trying to draw you out."

"Maybe," said Long. "I remember every detail of that dinner; I've gone over and over it in my mind. It was an ethnic dinner, so everyone was supplied with little Dutch hats made out of paper and special Indonesian dishes were served. I wore the hat but I hate curried food and the doctor asked about my speech just as a small dish of curried something-or-other was put before me as an appetizer. Between fuming over official stupidity and sickening over the smell of curry, I just burst out. If it hadn't been for the curry, perhaps—

"Anyway, after dinner I discovered that someone had been in my cabin. The contents of the paper weren't so important, classification or not, but what was important was that someone had taken action so quickly. Someone on the ship was part of a spy network and that was more important than the actual coup. Even if the present item were not important, the next one might be. It was vital to report the matter and, as a loyal citizen, I did."

Rubin said, "Isn't the doctor the logical suspect? He asked the question and he would be listening to the answer. The others might not have been listening. As an officer, he would be familiar with the ship, know how to get to your cabin quickly, perhaps even have a duplicate key. Did he have an opportunity to go to your cabin before you did?"

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"Yes, he did," said Long. "I thought of all that. The trouble is this. Everyone at the table heard me, because all the rest talked about the system of classification for a while. I kept quiet myself but I remember the matter of the Pentagon Papers came up. And everyone knew where my cabin was because I had given a small party in it for the table the day before. And those locks are easy to open for anyone with a little skill at it—though it was a mistake for the spy not to lock the door again on leaving; but whoever it was had to be in a hurry. And as it happened, everyone at the table had a chance to get to my cabin during the course of the meal."

"Who were the others, then?" asked Halsted.

"Two married couples and a single woman. The single woman—call her Miss Robinson—was pretty, a little on the plump side, had a pleasant sense of humor, but had the bad habit of smoking during meals. I rather think she took a fancy to the doctor. She sat between us—we always had the same seats."

"When did she have a chance to visit your cabin?" asked Halsted.

"She left shortly after I made my remark. I was brooding too deeply to be aware of it at the time but of course I remembered it afterward. She came back before the fuss over the hot chocolate came up because I remember her trying to help."

"Where did she say she went?"

"Nobody asked her at the time. She was asked afterward and she said she had gone to her cabin to go to the bathroom. Maybe she did. But her cabin was close to mine."

"No one saw her at all?"

"No one would. Everyone was in the dining room and to the Indonesians, all Americans look alike."

Avalon said, "What's the fuss over the hot chocolate you referred to?"

Long said, "That's where one of the married couples comes in. Call them the Smiths and the other couple the Joneses. Mr. Smith was the raucous type. He reminded me, in fact, of—"

"Oh, Lord," said Rubin. "Don't say it."

"All right, I won't. He was one of the lecturers—in fact, both Smith and Jones were. Smith talked fast, laughed easily, turned almost everything into a double entendre, and seemed to enjoy it all so much he had the rest of us doing it, too. He was a very odd person—the kind of fellow you

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can't help but take an instant dislike to and judge to be stupid. But then, as you got used to him, you found that you liked him after all and that under all his surface foolishness he was extremely intelligent. The first evening, I remember, the doctor kept staring at him as if he were a specimen, but by the end of the cruise the doctor had come to like and respect him.

"Jones was much quieter. He seemed horrified at first by Smith's outrageous comments but eventually he was matching him, I noticed—rather, I think, to Smith's discomfiture."

Avalon asked, "What were their fields?"

"Smith was a sociologist and Jones a biologist. The idea was that space exploration should be viewed from the light of many disciplines. It was a good concept but there were serious flaws in the execution. Some of the talks, though, were excellent. There was one on Mariner 9 and the new data on Mars that was superb, but that's beside the point.

"It was Mrs. Smith who created the fuss. She was a moderately tall thin girl. Not very good-looking by the usual standards but with an extraordinarily attractive personality. She was soft-spoken and clearly went through life automatically thinking of others. I believe everyone quickly grew to feel quite affectionate to her and Smith himself seemed devoted. The evening I shot my mouth off, she ordered hot chocolate. It came in a tall glass, very top-heavy and, of course, as a mistaken touch of elegance, it was brought on a tray.

"Smith, as usual, was talking animatedly and waving his arms as he did so. He used all his muscles when he talked. The ship swayed, he swayed—well, anyway, the hot chocolate went into Mrs. Smith's lap.

"She jumped up. So did everyone else. Miss Robinson moved quickly toward her to help. I noticed that and that's how I know she was back by then. Mrs. Smith waved help away and left in a hurry. Smith, looking suddenly confused and upset, tore off the paper Dutch hat he was wearing and followed.

"Five minutes later he was back, talking earnestly to the head steward. Then he came to the table and said that Mrs. Smith had sent him down to assure the steward she was wearing nothing that couldn't be washed, she hadn't been hurt, that it wasn't anyone's fault, and that no one should be blamed.

"He wanted to assure us she was all right, too. He asked if

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we could stay at the table till his wife came back. She was changing clothes and wanted to join us again so that none of us would feel as though anything very terrible had happened. We agreed, of course. None of us was going anywhere."

Avalon said, "And that means Mrs. Smith had time to go to your cabin."

Long nodded. "Yes. She didn't seem the type but I suppose in this game you have to disregard surface appearances."

"And you all waited?"

"Not the doctor. He got up and said he would get some ointment from his office in case she needed it for burns, but he came back before she did by a minute or so."

Avalon said, tapping his finger on the table slowly to lend emphasis, "And he, too, might have gone into your cabin. And Miss Robinson might have when she left before the hot-chocolate incident."

Rubin said, "Where do the Joneses come in?"

Long said, "Let me go on. When Mrs. Smith came back she denied having been burned and the doctor had no need to give her the ointment, so we can't say if he even went to get it. He might have been bluffing."

"What if she had asked for it?" said Halsted.

"Then he might have said he couldn't find what he had been looking for but if she came with him he'd do what he could. Who knows? In any case, we all sat for a while as though nothing unusual had happened and then, finally, we broke up. By that time ours was the last occupied table. Everyone left, with Mrs. Jones and myself lingering behind for a while."

"Mrs. Jones?" asked Drake.

"I haven't told you about Mrs. Jones. Dark hair and eyes, very vivacious. Had a penchant for sharp cheeses, always taking a bit of each off the tray when it was brought round. She had a way of looking at you when you talked that had you convinced you were the only other person in the world. I think Jones was rather a jealous type in his quiet way. At least, I never saw him more than two feet from her, except this one time. He got up and said he was going to their cabin and she said she would join him soon. Then she turned to me and said, 'Can you explain why those terraced icefields on Mars are significant? I've been meaning to ask you all during dinner and didn't get a chance.'

"It had been that day that we'd had the magnificent talk on Mars and I was rather flattered that she turned to me instead of to the astronomer

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who had given the talk. It seemed as though she were taking it for granted I knew as much as he did. So I talked to her for a while and she kept saying, 'How interesting.' "

Avalon said, "And meanwhile Jones could have been in your cabin."

"Could be. I thought of that afterward. It was certainly atypical behavior on both their parts."

Avalon said, "Let's summarize, then. There are four possibilities. Miss Robinson might have done it when she left before the hot-chocolate incident. The Smiths might have done it as a team after deliberately spilling the hot chocolate. Or the doctor could have done it while supposedly going for the ointment. Or the Joneses could have also done it as a team, with Jones doing the dirty work while Mrs. Jones kept Dr. Long out of action."

Long nodded. "All this was considered and by the time the ship was back in New York, security agents had begun the process of checking the backgrounds of all six. You see, in cases like this, suspicion is all you need. The only way any secret agent can remain undetected is for him or her to remain unsuspected. Once the eye of counterintelligence is on him, he must inevitably be unmasked. No cover can survive an investigation in depth."

Drake said, "Then which one did it prove to be?"

Long sighed. "That's where the trouble arose. None of them. All were clean. There was no way, I understand, of showing any one of them to be anything other than what they seemed."

Rubin said, "Why do you say you 'understand.' Aren't you part of the investigation?"

"At the wrong end. The clearer those six are, the guiltier I appear to be. I told the investigators—I *had* to tell them—that those six are the only ones who could possibly have done it, and if none of them did, they must suspect me of making up a story to hide something worse."

Trumbull said, "Oh, hell, Waldemar. They can't think that. What would you have to gain by reporting the incident if you were responsible?"

"That's what they don't know," said Long. "But the information did leak and if they can't pin it on any of the six, then they're going to pin it on me. And the more my motives puzzle them, the more they think those motives must be very disturbing and important. So I'm in trouble."

Rubin said, "Are you sure those six are really the only

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possibilities? Are you sure you really didn't mention it to anyone else?"

"Quite sure," said Long dryly.

"You might not remember having done so," said Rubin. "It could have been something very casual. Can you be *sure* you didn't?"

"I can be sure I didn't. The radiophone call came only a few minutes before dinner. There just wasn't time to tell anyone before dinner. And once I got away from the table, I was back in my cabin before I said anything to anybody."

"Who heard you on the phone? Maybe there were eavesdroppers."

"There were ship's officers standing around certainly. However, my boss expressed himself Aesopically. I knew what he meant, but no one else would have understood."

"Did you express *yourself* Aesopically?" asked Halsted.

"I'll tell you exactly what I said: 'Hello, Dave.' Then I said, 'Damn it to hell.' Then I hung up. I said those six words. No more."

Gonzalo brought his hands together in a sudden, enthusiastic clap. "Listen, I've been thinking. Why does the job have to be so planned? It could have been spontaneous. After all, everybody knows there's this cruise and people connected with NASA are going to talk and there might be something informative going on. Someone—it could have been anyone—kept searching various rooms during the dinner hour each day and finally came across your paper—"

"No," said Long sharply. "It passes the bounds of plausibility to suppose that someone, by the merest chance, would find my paper just in the hour or two after I had announced that a classified lecture was sitting on my desk. Besides, there was nothing in the paper that would have given any indication of importance to the non-expert. It was only my own remark that would have told anyone it was there and that it was important."

Avalon said thoughtfully, "Suppose one of the people at the table passed on the information, in perfect innocence? In the interval they were away from the table, they might have said to someone, 'Did you hear about poor Dr. Long? His paper was shot out from under him?' Then that someone, anyone, could have done the job."

Long shook his head. "I wish that could be so, but it can't. That would only happen if the particular individual at my table was innocent. If the Smiths

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were innocent when they left the table, the only thing on their mind would be the hot chocolate. They wouldn't stop to chat. The doctor, if innocent, would be thinking only of getting the ointment. By the time Jones left the table, assuming he was innocent, he would have forgotten about the matter; if anything, he would talk about the hot chocolate, too."

Rubin nodded. "All right. But what about Miss Robinson? She left before the hot-chocolate incident. The only interesting thing in her mind would have been your dilemma. She might have said something."

"Might she?" said Long. "If she is innocent, then she was really doing what she said she was doing—going to the bathroom in her cabin. If she had to desert the dinner table to do so, there would have had to be urgency; and no one under those conditions stops for idle chatter."

There was silence around the table.

Long said, "I'm sure investigation will continue and eventually the truth will come out and it will be clear that I'm guilty of no more than an unlucky indiscretion. By then, however, my career will be down the drain."

"Dr. Long?" said a soft voice. "May I ask a question?"

Long looked up, surprised. "A question?"

"I'm Henry, sir. The gentlemen of the Black Widowers Club occasionally allow me to participate—"

"We sure do, Henry," said Trumbull. "Do you see something the rest of us don't?"

"I'm not certain," said Henry. "I see quite plainly that Dr. Long believes only the six others at the table could possibly be involved, and those investigating the matter apparently agree with him—"

"There's no one else," said Long.

"Well, then," said Henry, "I am wondering if Dr. Long mentioned his views on curry to the investigators."

Long said, "You mean that I didn't like curry?"

"Yes," said Henry. "Did that come up?"

Long spread his hands and then shook his head. "No, I don't think it did. Why should it? It's irrelevant. It's just an additional excuse for my talking like a jackass. I told it to you here in order to get some sympathy, I suppose, but it certainly would mean nothing to the investigators."

Henry remained silent for a moment, and Trumbull said, "Does the curry have meaning to you, Henry?"

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"I think it does," said Henry. "I think we are in rather the position Mr. Halsted described earlier in the evening in connection with limericks. Some limericks to be effective must be *seen*; sound is not enough. And some scenes to be effective must be seen."

"I don't get that," said Long.

"Well, Dr. Long," said Henry. "You sat there in the ship's restaurant at a table with six other people and therefore only those six other people heard you. But if we could *see* the scene instead of having you describe it to us, wouldn't we see something that you have omitted?"

"No, you wouldn't," said Long doggedly.

"Are you sure?" asked Henry. "You sit here with six other people at a table, too, just as you did on the ship. How many people have heard your story?"

"Six—" began Long.

And then Gonzalo broke in, "No, seven, counting you, Henry."

"And was there no one serving you at the table, Dr. Long? You said the doctor had asked you about the speech just as a curried dish was put before you and it was the smell of curry that annoyed you to the point where you burst out with your indiscretion. Surely, the curry didn't place itself before you of its own accord. The fact is that at the moment you made your statement, there were six people sitting at the table, and a seventh standing just behind you and out of sight."

"The waiter," said Long in a whisper.

Henry said, "There's a tendency never to notice a waiter unless he annoys you. An efficient waiter is invisible, and you mentioned the excellence of the service. Might it not have been the waiter who carefully engineered the spilling of the hot chocolate to create a diversion, or perhaps took advantage of the diversion, if it were an accident. With waiters many and diners few, it might not be too noticeable if he disappeared for a while. Or he could claim to have gone to the men's room if it were noticed. He would know the location of the cabin as well as the doctor did, and be as likely to have some sort of picklock."

Long said, "But he was an Indonesian. He couldn't speak English."

"Are you sure? He'd had a three-month cram course, you said. And he might have known English better than he pretended. You would be willing to suspect that Mrs. Smith was not as sweet and thoughtful under-

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neath as she was on the surface, and that Mrs. Jones's vivacity was a pretense, and the doctor's respectability, and Smith's liveliness and Jones's devotion and Miss Robinson's need to go to the bathroom. Might not the waiter's ignorance of English also have been a pretense?"

"By God," said Long, looking at his watch, "if it weren't so late I'd call Washington now."

Trumbull said, "If you know some home phone numbers, *do* call now. Your career is at stake. Tell them the waiter ought to be investigated, and for heaven's sake don't tell them you got the notion from someone else."

"You mean, tell them I just thought of it? They'll ask why I didn't think of it before."

"Ask them why *they* didn't. Why didn't *they* think a waiter goes with a table in a dining room?"

Henry said softly. "No reason for anyone to think of it. Only very few are as interested in waiters as I am."

"Q"

CRIMINALIMERICK

THE INVISIBLE GUEST

by D. R. BENSEN

Though Black Widowers really would rr.
Help their guest with his bad spot of br.,
They turn to the waiter
Who comes through sooner or later
Like Chesterton's favorite Fr.

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a NEW Ulysses S. Byrd story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Now that the Ulysses S. Byrd stories have become a series, we feel freer to make a general comment: the Early Byrd capers remind us of the early con-man stories by Erle Stanley Gardner. Ulysses S. Byrd and Lester Leith (remember the larcenous Lester?) are swindlers under the skull, tricksters under the think-tank—in the more familiar phrase, brothers under the skin . . .

THE GOLD BUDDHA CAPER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The two men who had come together by the reflecting pool across from the Lincoln Memorial were as dissimilar as only two slim and stocky men can be, and since they were still strangers to each other there was no conversation between them. It was not until a third man appeared—a tall athletic type with a camera in one hand—that they seemed to cohere into a group.

The newcomer smiled and greeted each one in turn, introducing them to each other. Then he passed out white plastic convention badges bearing the symbol of the American Institute of Architects. "In the event anyone sees us together," he explained, "we're just three conventioneers enjoying the architecture of Washington."

"You think of everything," the slim man said. His name was Rudy Ventrose, and at one time he'd worked for a small airline that flew cargo into the Far East for the C.I.A. He was an aging adventurer, a soldier of fortune, and he looked the part—which is why he'd been chosen.

"I try to think of everything," the newcomer agreed. He turned to the stocky man, the money man in the deal. Without him the whole caper would collapse. "What about it,

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Higgins? Did you read my notes?"

Sam Higgins was not a man to jump into anything, even into a simple reply. He grunted and removed his straw hat, mopping the bald spot on his head before he answered. "The scheme sounds a bit far-fetched to me, Mr. Jenner. For one thing we'd need a damn good helicopter pilot and they're not easy to find."

The man called Jenner smiled and turned to Ventrose. "How about it, Rudy? Could you do it?"

"How much does the statue weigh?"

"I'd estimate ten thousand pounds."

Sam Higgins whistled. "Of solid gold?"

"Even if it's a shell, it's still worth a fortune."

Rudy Ventrose thought about it. "A big helicopter could lift that much easy. One of those HUEYs like they use in Vietnam. But how do we get one?"

"Leave that to me," the man called Jenner said. "A great deal of war surplus material is being sold cheap in Hong Kong and other Far Eastern cities. HUEY helicopters are popular with oil companies for hauling heavy rigs. I think we can pick one up."

"You've got it all thought out," Sam Higgins said. "Everything but the money you'll need."

Jenner smiled. "That's where you come in."

"How much capital will it take?"

"Our cover story, to explain the need for the helicopter and the other equipment in that area, will be that we're on a snake-catching expedition for American zoos. To make it look right we'll need a few cages and some supplies. I'd say capital of one hundred thousand would cover everything—the surplus helicopter and the rest of it."

Sam Higgins whistled softly. "That's a lot of loot."

"Not for a man like you. And not for what we're going after."

Higgins stared up at the Lincoln Memorial, as if to make certain the President wasn't eying them. "Let's go through it again from the beginning, Jenner, just to make certain we've all got it straight. Your notes weren't clear on a few points. For one thing, are there just the three of us involved?"

Jenner shook his head. "There's a fourth, a young woman named Tarsa, who'll be traveling with me."

"Where does she fit in?"

"She will render certain important services at the proper time."

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"All right, I'll take your word she's needed. But her cut comes out of your share."

Jenner spread his hands. "Agreed."

"Now let's have it—the complete timetable of the operation."

"Very well. We split after this meeting and get together a week from now in Hong Kong. We buy a surplus helicopter—the actual purchase will be your job, Rudy, since you'll be flying it. We buy the other supplies we need. And then the four of us head for Thailand in the helicopter. After we spend a few days setting up our base and catching a few snakes, we zero in on this gold Buddha. I'll do the ground work, while you two will be in the copter with Tarsa. Once I attach the chain you simply lift the Buddha and fly away with it. Back at our base camp we melt down the gold and reshape it into bars. We smuggle it into India in the false bottoms of the snake cages, and sell the gold on the illegal market."

"Five tons of gold in false bottoms? The customs agents would have to be blind to let that much get through!"

"In some parts of the world they often are just that—blind. We'll fly the gold in to a remote airport where the customs people are cooperative. I guarantee it. What do you say?"

Higgins grumbled a bit but finally agreed. "I'll have the money a week from today, in Hong Kong."

They shook hands and the man named Jenner left them, walking quickly around the reflecting pool toward a waiting car. Higgins thought there might have been someone waiting inside it—perhaps a woman.

"What do you think about it?" Rudy Ventrose asked.

"I think it's very interesting," Sam Higgins replied, scratching his thinning hairline.

"Never thought I'd be stealing a gold Buddha!" Ventrose exclaimed.

"You still might not be."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't make my money being taken in by every two-bit con artist in the business, Rudy. That man with his wonderful scheme, that so-called Mr. Jenner, is really a slippery cuss named Ulysses S. Byrd. He's a con man who specializes in fleecing people like me."

"*That* was Byrd?" Ventrose's mouth hung open. "Sure, I've heard of the guy. But this Jenner seemed so—so sincere!"

"Oh, he's a clever one—just about the best in the business."

"Then we won't be going to Hong Kong?"

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Sam Higgins grinned. "On the contrary, Rudy. We'll be going, all right—just to see what Mr. Con-man Byrd has up his sleeve. I might even take along a little money for him. It'll be something like putting salt on a Byrd's tail."

The narrow streets of Hong Kong, always crowded and cramped, gave the city an oppressive atmosphere that was not helped by the dark storm clouds hanging low on the horizon. Even in the waterfront area, with its blaze of neoned bars and barely disguised brothels, there was no joy to be found.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Tarsa suggested. "It'll be night soon and the others will be arriving."

Ulysses S. Byrd, who was neither quite so young nor quite so handsome as women sometimes thought, made one final purchase from a street vendor and turned smiling toward Tarsa. "Agreed. It looks as if it's going to rain anyway." He held up his latest purchase for her inspection. "What do you think of it, Tarsa? Is it worth the money?"

She touched the bolt of fine silk cloth. "It will make some woman a nice dress."

He hailed a passing taxi and gave the driver the name of their hotel. "I was thinking of you."

"Oh, Byrd! Can you see me wearing silk while I chase through the jungle after a giant python? I thought you brought me along to catch the snakes."

"I did," he said with a smile. "But stop calling me Byrd. I'm Jenner from now on."

"I wish you'd let me in on your little game."

"Just play along, and look lovely. That shouldn't be too difficult."

They'd been back at the hotel nearly an hour when the phone rang in Byrd's room. It was Sam Higgins, calling from the airport. "Just landed with Rudy. Bumpy flight with that storm brewing."

"It'll blow over. This is the wrong season for it."

"Do we see you tonight, Jenner?"

"No reason to. Let's make it tomorrow morning at nine, down in the lobby. We'll go out and look over the surplus equipment."

When he'd hung up, Byrd sat smiling on the bed. Tarsa came out of the bathroom and asked, "What's the grin for?"

"Because they came. He swallowed the bait, my dear—and I must admit a five-ton gold Buddha was quite a lot of bait to swallow."

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In the morning they taxied out to a warehouse area near the docks which had been given over to disposal of surplus American Army equipment from Vietnam. A large lot next to one warehouse held road-building equipment, bulldozers, trucks, and a few helicopters in need of repair.

"I thought they'd be in better shape than this," Higgins said, looking over the copters. "What do you think, Rudy?"

Ventrose ran his hand over a string of bullet holes in the side of one copter. "Hell, I've flown things a lot worse than this. If the price is right, let's buy it."

And so, on the first day, they acquired their war-surplus helicopter. Sam Higgins paid for it with a check drawn on a Hong Kong bank.

"How long will it take to get it in shape?" Byrd asked Rudy.

The former pilot stared up at the rotors. "Two days at most. We'll be ready to leave by the end of the week."

Later, over cooling gin drinks in the hotel bar, the four of them talked. Sam Higgins had taken an immediate liking to Tarsa and was curious to learn of her background.

"I was at the Berlin zoo for a time," she told him. "And later at the Los Angeles zoo. Reptiles are my specialty. I'd just taken a job back east when I met Jenner. He told me about his plans and invited me to come along. You three can get all the gold Buddhas you want. I'm after pythons."

"This Buddha caper still sounds like a dream to me," Rudy Ventrose said. "I was in on some crazy missions for the C.I.A. in my day, but never anything like this. Isn't the statue cemented into place or bolted down or something?"

Byrd shook his head. "The mortar that was holding it has crumbled with the centuries. There are those who'll tell you the same thing has happened to the golden dome of the Taj Mahal. A helicopter could probably lift it right off."

"Oh, sure!"

"No, really!" Byrd took a sip of his drink. "I'd give it a try, except that the Indian air force would probably be onto us in a matter of minutes."

"Yes," Higgins agreed dryly. "Better lay off the Taj Mahal."

After Byrd and the girl left the table and went to their room, Sam Higgins sat with Rudy and had another drink. "He sure seems on the level," the ex-pilot said. "You positive about him being a con man?"

"I'm positive. But he's going to have a tough time getting any money out of me."

"What about the copter? You put up the money for that."

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Higgins grinned and sipped his drink. "My check was drawn on a Hong Kong bank account that's being opened with money transferred from the States. About three days from now they'll discover there's no money to transfer, but by that time we'll be long gone."

"And what about Byrd?"

"Whatever he's up to concerns this gold Buddha. If we just keep our wits about us nothing will go wrong. In any event, he won't get any money out of me." Higgins patted a spot under his left arm. "The most he might get is a bullet, if he tries any tricks."

In the morning, while Byrd and the girl went shopping for snake-hunting supplies, Sam Higgins and Rudy returned to the lot to work on the helicopter. They had a good view of the harbor from there, and Higgins could see the rows of junks and barges on which so many of the Chinese lived out most of their lives.

"It's a crazy city," Higgins decided. "Rich and poor, east and west, white and yellow."

"Yeah," Rudy Ventrose said, looking up from the copter's control panel. He didn't spend much time worrying about such things. He'd killed too many people of all races to think about it now.

A moment later, as he was checking the wiring beneath the control panel, his fingers encountered something hard wrapped in paper. "What's this?"

Higgins climbed in to have a look. "Unwrap it." Then his eyes widened as he saw the clear green jewel. "Damn, if that doesn't look like an emerald!"

"Maybe it is. There's a name and address on the paper it was wrapped in. *Vang Pao, 15 Street of Little Nights, Hong Kong.*"

"What do you make of it?" Higgins asked.

Rudy shrugged. "Who knows? It might have been hidden here after the copter arrived in Hong Kong, or it might have come all the way from Vietnam. It's no secret that the South Vietnamese have used our aircraft for smuggling raw opium and morphine to make heroin. And Hong Kong is one of the centers for this traffic. The emerald might be some sort of payoff."

Sam Higgins was thinking fast. "Forget the helicopter for now. Let's visit this Vang Pao on the Street of Little Nights and see what it's all about."

Ulysses S. Byrd stared at the snake, taking in the full beauty of its speckled brown body.

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"That one will do nicely," he told Tarsa. "What is it?"

"An Indian python. They sometimes grow to eighteen or twenty feet long, but this is just a small one. About nine feet."

"That's long enough for me," Byrd told her. "How much?"

"A hundred dollars a foot."

"Fine." He took the money from his wallet. "And the cage?"

"All taken care of."

He smiled at her. "I knew you were efficient the first moment I saw you."

"But what do you want me to do with it? You didn't bring me halfway around the world just to buy a python for you."

"All in due time," he said.

Later, when they'd arranged for the python to be caged and prepared for shipment, Byrd and Tarsa returned to the hotel. The other two were not back yet, so they decided to relax by the swimming pool.

"Byrd?" she asked, lounging by his side in the afternoon sunlight. "Why do they call you the Early Byrd?"

"It's a nickname I acquired early in life. I didn't catch many worms before the others, but I have on occasion achieved some other victories by being first on the scene—or first away from the scene, as the case may be."

"You're a crook, aren't you, Byrd?" she asked directly.

"To some people I am. To others I suppose I'm something of a hero. Such things are relative."

"Are you really planning to steal that gold Buddha?"

"You just accused me of being a crook. What do you think?"

She rolled over and smiled. "I think you're just crooked enough *not* to steal it. That's what I think!"

The Street of Little Nights was a dark narrow alley that ran through an old part of the city overlooking the Happy Valley Race Course. It was a district that was mainly Chinese, and Sam Higgins saw no western faces as he followed Ventrose over the cobblestone pavement.

"You sure this is the place?" Higgins asked as they paused before a dim doorway.

"Number 15, like the note says. Of course, Vang Pao might be long gone."

"Let's see."

Rudy Ventrose used his slight knowledge of oriental tongues to establish that Vang Pao was still in residence, occupying an upstairs apartment. When Vang Pao answered the door he proved to be a short Chinese gentleman, with a tiny beard and frightened eyes.

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"What you want?"

"Speak English?" Ventrose asked.

"Yes. What you want?"

Sam Higgins stepped into view, holding out his hand so that Vang Pao could see the emerald. "Is this yours?"

"No, no! Where you get that?" The eyes were really terrified now.

Higgins pushed his way into the room. "Look, Vang Pao, we know all about your connection with the opium traffic. It won't do you any good to lie about it."

The Chinese shook his head vigorously. "No, no! I know nothing!"

"How many more of these emeralds do you have?"

"None."

Higgins sighed. "All right, Rudy. We'll have to take him along with us."

"You no police," the bearded man said. "You bad ones."

"Look, Vang Pao, we're here to do business. If you cooperate we'll all make some money. If you don't we'll sure as hell get some police up here fast enough! Understand that?"

"Yes."

"Now tell us—do you have opium?"

"No, no! I only middleman."

"But you do have emeralds."

"I can get," he admitted.

"We want emeralds, Vang Pao. Lots of emeralds just like this one. Can you get them?"

The Chinese shrugged. "Cost much money."

"Not for us, Vang Pao. We're old friends, aren't we? I'll bet for us you could get them at cost—whatever you pay."

"You come back. I see."

"No, no. One of us stays with you to make sure you don't fly away. How long will it take?"

"Tomorrow."

"Rudy, you stay with him."

The ex-pilot looked scared. "Hell, I don't want to stay in this place all night! He's liable to stick a knife in my ribs!"

Higgins considered that and finally agreed. But it was best to keep up the pressure on the Chinese while they had him worried. "All right, Vang Pao. We'll have to do it this afternoon." He took out his check book. "Let's see the color of your emeralds and we'll deal."

Vang Pao moved across the room to the cot on which he slept. He pulled a suitcase from underneath and opened it. Carefully working at the lining he extracted a tiny cloth bag. "These three are all I have here. The rest come tomorrow."

Higgins held them up to the light and whistled. "These are perfect stones."

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"Perfect, yes."

"How much?"

"These high-class emeralds, from Ural Mountains."

"How much?" Higgins repeated.

"One thousand British pounds each."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars American."

"No, no! Not enough."

"How many will you have tomorrow?"

"Many emeralds. Some rubies, some diamonds."

"All right. Tell you what I'll do. I'll buy these at a thousand pounds each, then come back tomorrow and talk about the others." He started to write a check.

"No check!" the Chinese said. "Cash."

"Hell, I don't carry that much cash with me!"

"You get cash or no deal." The Chinese snatched the tiny sack of precious stones.

Sam Higgins made a move to hit him, then thought better of it. "We'll be here tomorrow morning," he told the man. "You have the jewels we want."

"Thousand pounds each."

"Yeah. Sure. I'll have the money."

They left him and went down to the street. Ventrose was shaking his head. "Imagine that guy living in a place like this with all the money that must pass through his hands."

"Things have different values in the Orient, Rudy. They say packets of heroin sell on the streets of Bangkok for twelve U.S. cents. And you know how cheap we got that helicopter."

"So what do we do?"

"How much cash do you have?"

"Me? Not more than a thousand, in Traveler's Cheques."

"I have about two thousand." Higgins sighed. "I'll have to go to that bank again and put through a long-distance call to New York. The money we need can be cabled to me."

"You're really going to pay him?"

Higgins nodded. "But in dollars, not pounds. He's so scared he'll take whatever I give him. And we'll make ourselves a bundle. Those emeralds we saw today are worth five times what he's asking." He chuckled at the thought of it.

"What's so funny?" Rudy asked.

"While Ulysses S. Byrd is working out his scheme to swindle us with a gold Buddha, we're going to make a real killing—right here under his nose!"

They went that night to inspect the python Byrd and Tarsa had bought. Sam Higgins

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pretended to take a critical interest in it, though in truth his mind was far away.

"And how does this fit into the scheme?" he asked Byrd.

"You'll see."

"What did it cost?"

"Nine hundred dollars. Snakes are sold by the foot, and this one is nine feet long."

"All right," Higgins said, feeling generous. "I'll give you a check to cover it. I'm still covering expenses."

"Fine. Tarsa has one cage already, and she'll be having others made. How's the work coming on the helicopter?"

Rudy shuffled his feet. "Uh, it'll be ready day after tomorrow."

"Good. We have a month before the monsoon season sets in, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Neither do we," Higgins said. "I can almost feel that gold in my hands."

Byrd nodded. "The one snake should do it. And since we have it already, Tarsa won't have to risk her precious skin chasing one through the jungle."

They all went for a drink at the hotel bar and ended the day with a toast to the success of their operation.

In the morning Sam Higgins and Rudy Ventrose returned to the Street of Little Nights. Higgins had made the arrangements at his bank, and the money had been transferred there from New York.

Now he turned to Rudy and said, "Go get him. Tell him I'll meet him down here. No sense in us going up there and getting our throats cut."

"But I can go up, huh?"

"He won't harm you while I'm waiting down here with the money. Go on."

After a few minutes Rudy reappeared, followed by the bearded Chinese. "I no do business in street," he told Higgins. "You come upstairs."

"How's it look up there, Rudy?"

"All clear. And he's got the stuff. I saw it."

"Let me see money," Vang Pao said.

Higgins produced a wad of hundred-dollar bills. "The rest is at the bank."

"Then we go there. I bring jewels and we go to bank."

Higgins could see there was no arguing with the man. And the bank was certainly a safe place. "All right. We'll go there."

It was the Hong Kong branch of a leading British bank, crowded with the usual local mixture of orientals and westerners. They were ushered into one of the cubicles

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reserved for holders of safe-deposit boxes and the Chinese opened the little suitcase he'd carried from his room. "Here are jewels. You know price."

Higgins chose one emerald at random and held it to the light. It looked flawless. "What do you think, Rudy?"

"Looks genuine to me."

"How much, Vang Pao?"

"One thousand British pounds."

Sam Higgins was not an expert on the value of precious stones, but he estimated there must be close to a half-million dollars in gems on the table before him. The drug traffic in Southeast Asia was big business.

"Wait a minute," Rudy Ventrose said suddenly, interrupting the proceedings. "How do we know they aren't really fakes? In fact, how do we know this guy isn't working with the Early Byrd to swindle us?"

Sam Higgins looked from the gems to Vang Pao to Rudy. "How could that be? Byrd is busy planning the theft of the Buddha."

Rudy shrugged. "Do what you want, it's your money. But I'd sure as hell pick a few of these gems at random and get them appraised."

"No time for that," Vang Pao said. "You no want jewels, I trade them for opium."

"Wait a minute," Higgins said. "Rudy is right. I'm not paying good money for a collection of glass. I'll just take a few of these and have them checked out."

"I no wait," the Chinese said. "I go." He started to close the suitcase.

"Here," Rudy Ventrose suggested. "You stay with him and I'll check them out. Pick three or four stones for me to take. There's a jeweler right across the street."

"Good idea," Higgins agreed. "Here." He passed over the emerald he was holding plus two of the larger diamonds. "And hurry back."

Because he trusted no one, Sam Higgins stood in the doorway and through the bank's front window watched Rudy's progress. When he saw the slim man enter the jewelry store he returned to the table and sat down. "Now, Vang Pao, let's talk money."

"One hundred thousand British pounds buys full suitcase."

"Come on, now! I told you I deal only in dollars!"

"Two hundred fifty thousand American dollars."

"No deal."

"Jewels worth more than twice that."

"No deal. My top price is seventy-five thousand American."

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The Chinese sat there, saying nothing. In a few moments Rudy returned, placing the three jewels carefully on the table. "They're the real McCoy," he said, with something like awe in his voice. "The jeweler said this diamond alone is probably worth five thousand pounds. He offered to buy it."

"You see?" the Chinese said. "If you do not buy, I sell there."

"A hundred thousand dollars," Higgins said. "That's as high as I go."

Vang Pao started to close his case. "You waste my time."

Higgins reached out to grasp his wrist. "Look, you're not going anywhere. Either you take my offer or I turn you in to the police as an opium dealer."

A spark of fear lit up the slanted eyes. "You no prove that!"

"I prove it with these jewels. You think they'll believe you got them honestly? Take your choice—a hundred grand or you rot in a Hong Kong jail."

Vang Pao considered it. He looked from one to the other, and finally said, very softly, "All right. Give me money."

Sam Higgins sighed with relief. He opened the door and called over to the bank's assistant manager, asking him for $100,000 in American bills.

"That's a very large request," the man said. "We may not have that much in American bills. And that would use up your full credit with your New York bank."

"Let me worry about that. Get the money. You can use some British pounds."

Presently the money was delivered in tightly banded stacks. Higgins counted through each stack carefully, passing them to Vang Pao who also counted them. At the end the Chinese slid the case of jewels across the table and placed the money in a cloth bag. He bowed slightly and left.

"What do we do now?" Rudy asked. "How do we get this stuff out of the country? And what about Byrd?"

"Forget Byrd. And as for getting them out of the country, perhaps we won't have to. I'm going across to the jeweler right now and see how much of a profit we can make on a quick turnover."

They left the bank and crossed the street. Sam Higgins entered the jewelry store and walked quickly to the counter. He had to wait a few moments before the Chinese clerk finished with a woman customer and came over to him. "May I help?"

Higgins took out some of the jewels. "I understand you're

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interested in buying these."

The man squinted at an emerald in Higgins' hand. "You must be joking, sir. That one is not genuine."

"What? Rudy, tell this guy—" Higgins looked around, but Rudy Ventrose was no longer standing behind him. In fact, he was nowhere in the shop. "The man I came in with—the American—he was here just a short time ago for an appraisal."

The Chinese clerk was shaking his head. "We do not give appraisals here."

"But I *saw* him come in here!" Higgins almost screamed.

"An American came in to inquire after wrist watches. Is that the one you mean?"

But Sam Higgins was pulling the gems from the suitcase now, holding them frantically up in front of the Chinese clerk, who only kept shaking his head.

Ulysses S. Byrd stood back to inspect the caged python. "I think we're about ready to leave now," he told Tarsa. "Do you have your luggage?"

"It's all packed," she answered. "I was just going to—"

There was a knock on the door and Byrd opened it. But it was not the men for the snake's cage. Instead it was Sam Higgins, holding a .22 automatic pointed at Byrd's chest.

"Back inside, Byrd! I've come for my money."

Byrd stepped back with a smile. "Come right ahead, but my name is Jenner and I don't know what money you mean. You can hardly expect payment when the gold Buddha is still somewhere in the jungles of Thailand."

"You're not kidding me, Byrd! You set me up with that phony Rudy and that Chinaman!"

But Ulysses S. Byrd merely laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Open your bags. The girl's, too! That money makes a pretty big bundle, and I'm going to find it!"

"Whatever you say." Byrd sighed.

Higgins searched quickly through the luggage while keeping his pistol aimed at them. When he found nothing he checked the closet and went through the dresser. He looked beneath the mattress and even in the bathroom toilet tank. Finally his eyes fell on the snake's cage. "Of course, the false bottom! But not for gold, Byrd. Just for good old folding money. Open it!"

Byrd nodded to Tarsa who went quickly to the cage and pressed an invisible lever. The bottom panel sprang open, revealing an empty space.

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There was no money.

Higgins cursed and raised his pistol again. "You've got ten seconds to produce my money, Byrd!"

"I know nothing of your money. If you were swindled it was not my doing. I suggest you get to the airport as quickly as possible to prevent Rudy from leaving the country."

Sam Higgins hesitated, studying their faces. The girl looked genuinely mystified, and Byrd seemed amused. "I'll be back," Higgins said finally. "With the police!"

He hurried down to the street, pocketing the gun.

"Pardon me," a voice behind him said. "Are you Mr. Sam Higgins?"

He turned to see a tall Englishman with a white mustache and an air of authority. "Yeah, that's me. So what?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to accompany us down to the police station, Mr. Higgins. There seems to be some problem with a check you passed the other day, in payment for a surplus helicopter. The bank reports there is no money to cover it."

The plane to Tokyo left promptly at six, and it had been airborne for some minutes before Tarsa turned in her seat to speak to Byrd. "But we are not going to Thailand at all!"

"No, we're going home."

"Back to America? With the python?"

"With the python."

She let out her breath. "You did swindle Sam Higgins?"

"In a manner of speaking. I took advantage of his own greed. You asked earlier why they called me the Early Byrd. Well, you see, Sam Higgins recognized me from the beginning, and from the beginning he knew I'd be trying to con him. But he expected the con game would involve the gold Buddha. Instead I used misdirection—and a variation of an old con trick. All, I might say, a bit earlier than he expected." He smiled at the thought. "I really must mail him one of my bird feathers—my trademark, you know."

"And the money?"

"I had to pay off Rudy and Vang Pao, and of course there'll be something for you after you've done your job."

"Which is?"

Ulysses S. Byrd chuckled. "To retrieve the money, of course. I induced the python to swallow it back in Hong Kong. The money's well wrapped, and I trust he'll find it quite indigestible. You shouldn't have too much trouble getting him to disgorge it after we land."

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a *NEW* detective story by

BILL PRONZINI

We are happy to welcome Bill Pronzini in his first appearance in EQMM . . . "Proof of Guilt" is not one of Bill Pronzini's private-eye stories. It's about a pair of big-city detectives who are challenged by what looks like an impossible crime—yes, a locked-room mystery, but with a "difference." The author called it "a very special case of murder"—and we think you'll agree . . .

PROOF OF GUILT

by BILL PRONZINI

I've been a city cop for 32 years now, and during that time I've heard of and been involved in some of the weirdest, most audacious crimes imaginable—on and off public record. But as far as I'm concerned, the murder of an attorney named Adam Chillingham is *the* damnedest case in my experience, if not in the entire annals of crime.

You think I'm exaggerating? Well, listen to the way it was.

My partner Jack Sherrard and I were in the Detective Squadroom one morning last summer when this call came in from a man named Charles Hearn. He said he was Adam Chillingham's law clerk, and that his employer had just been shot to death; he also said he had the killer trapped in the lawyer's private office.

It seemed like a fairly routine case at that point. Sherrard and I drove out to the Dawes Building, a skyscraper in a new business development on the city's south side, and rode the elevator up to Chillingham's suite of offices on the sixteenth floor. Hearn, and a woman named Clarisse Tower, who told us she had been the dead man's secretary, were waiting in the anteroom with two uniformed patrolmen who had arrived minutes earlier.

According to Hearn, a man named George Dillon had made

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a 10:30 appointment with Chillingham, had kept it punctually, and had been escorted by the attorney into the private office at that exact time. At 10:40 Hearn thought he heard a muffled explosion from inside the office, but he couldn't be sure because the walls were partially sound-proofed.

Hearn got up from his desk in the anteroom and knocked on the door and there was no response; then he tried the knob and found that the door was locked from the inside. Miss Tower confirmed all this, although she said she hadn't heard any sound; her desk was farther away from the office door than was Hearn's.

A couple of minutes later the door had opened and George Dillon had looked out and calmly said that Chillingham had been murdered. He had not tried to leave the office after the announcement; instead, he'd seated himself in a chair near the desk and lighted a cigarette. Hearn satisfied himself that his employer was dead, made a hasty exit, but had the presence of mind to lock the door from the outside by the simple expediency of transferring the key from the inside to the outside—thus sealing Dillon in the office with the body. After which Hearn put in his call to Headquarters.

So Sherrard and I drew our guns, unlocked the door, and burst into the private office. This George Dillon was sitting in the chair across the desk, very casual, both his hands up in plain sight. He gave us a relieved look and said he was glad the police had arrived so quickly.

I went over and looked at the body, which was sprawled on the floor behind the desk; a pair of French windows were open in the wall just beyond, letting in a warm summer breeze. Chillingham had been shot once in the right side of the neck, with what appeared by the size of the wound to have been a small-caliber bullet; there was no exit wound, and there were no powder burns.

I straightened up, glanced around the office, and saw that the only door was the one which we had just come through. There was no balcony or ledge outside the open windows—just a sheer drop of 16 stories to a parklike, well-landscaped lawn which stretched away for several hundred yards. The nearest building was a hundred yards distant, angled well to the right. Its roof was about on a level with Chillingham's office, it being a lower structure than the Dawes Building; not much of

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the roof was visible unless you peered out and around.

Sherrard and I then questioned George Dillon—and he claimed he hadn't killed Chillingham. He said the attorney had been standing at the open windows, leaning out a little, and that all of a sudden he had cried out and fallen down with the bullet in his neck. Dillon said he'd taken a look out the windows, hadn't seen anything, checked that Chillingham was dead, then unlocked the door and summoned Hearn and Miss Tower.

When the coroner and the lab crew finally got there, and the doc had made his preliminary examination, I asked him about the wound. He confirmed my earlier guess—a small-caliber bullet, probably a .22 or .25. He couldn't be absolutely sure, of course, until he took out the slug at the post-mortem.

I talked things over with Sherrard and we both agreed that it was pretty much improbable for somebody with a .22 or .25 caliber weapon to have shot Chillingham from the roof of the nearest building; a small caliber like that just doesn't have a range of a hundred yards and the angle was almost too sharp. There was nowhere else the shot could have come from—except from inside the office. And that left us with George Dillon, whose story was obviously false and who just as obviously had killed the attorney while the two of them were locked inside this office.

You'd think it was pretty cut and dried then, wouldn't you? You'd think all we had to do was arrest Dillon and charge him with homicide, and our job was finished. Right?

Wrong.

Because we couldn't find the gun.

Remember, now, Dillon had been locked in that office—except for the minute or two it took Hearn to examine the body and slip out and relock the door—from the time Chillingham died until the time we came in. And both Hearn and Miss Tower swore that Dillon hadn't stepped outside the office during that minute or two. We'd already searched Dillon and he had nothing on him. We searched the office—I mean, we *searched* that office—and there was no gun there.

We sent officers over to the roof of the nearest building and down onto the landscaped lawn; they went over every square inch of ground and rooftop, and they didn't find anything. Dillon hadn't thrown the gun out the open windows then, and there was no place on

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the face of the sheer wall of the building where a gun could have been hidden.

So where was the murder weapon? What had Dillon done with it? Unless we found that out, we had no evidence against him that would stand up in a court of law; his word that he *hadn't* killed Chillingham, despite the circumstantial evidence of the locked room, was as good as money in the bank. It was up to us to prove him guilty, not up to him to prove himself innocent. You see the problem?

We took him into a large book-filled room that was part of the Chillingham suite—what Hearn called the "archives"—and sat him down in a chair and began to question him extensively. He was a big husky guy with blondish hair and these perfectly guileless eyes; he just sat there and looked at us and answered in a polite voice, maintaining right along that he hadn't killed the lawyer.

We made him tell his story of what had happened in the office a dozen times, and he explained it the same way each time—no variations. Chillingham had locked the door after they entered, and then they sat down and talked over some business. Pretty soon Chillingham complained that it was stuffy in the room, got up, and opened the French windows; the next thing Dillon knew, he said, the attorney collapsed with the bullet in him. He hadn't heard any shot, he said; Hearn must be mistaken about a muffled explosion.

I said finally, "All right, Dillon, suppose you tell us why you came to see Chillingham. What was this business you discussed?"

"He was my father's lawyer," Dillon said, "and the executor of my father's estate. He was also a thief. He stole three hundred and fifty thousand dollars of my father's money."

Sherrard and I stared at him. Jack said, "That gives you one hell of a motive for murder, if it's true."

"It's true," Dillon said flatly. "And yes, I suppose it does give me a strong motive for killing him. I admit I hated the man, I hated him passionately."

"You admit that, do you?"

"Why not? I have nothing to hide."

"What did you expect to gain by coming here to see Chillingham?" I asked. "Assuming you didn't come here to kill him."

"I wanted to tell him I knew what he'd done, and that I was going to expose him for the thief he was."

"You tell him that?"

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"I was leading up to it when he was shot."

"Suppose you go into a little more detail about this alleged theft from your father's estate."

"All right." Dillon lit a cigarette. "My father was a hard-nosed businessman, a self-made type who acquired a considerable fortune in textiles; as far as he was concerned, all of life revolved around money. But I've never seen it that way; I've always been something of a free spirit and to hell with negotiable assets. Inevitably, my father and I had a falling-out about fifteen years ago, when I was twenty-three, and I left home with the idea of seeing some of the big wide world—which is exactly what I did.

"I traveled from one end of this country to the other, working at different jobs, and then I went to South America for a while. Some of the wanderlust finally began to wear off, and I decided to come back to this city and settle down—maybe even patch things up with my father. I arrived several days ago and learned then that he had been dead for more than two years."

"You had no contact with your father during the fifteen years you were drifting around?"

"None whatsoever. I told you, we had a falling-out. And we'd never been close to begin with."

Sherrard asked, "So what made you suspect Chillingham had stolen money from your father's estate?"

"I am the only surviving member of the Dillon family; there are no other relatives, not even a distant cousin. I knew my father wouldn't have left me a cent, not after all these years, and I didn't particularly care; but I *was* curious to find out to whom he had willed his estate."

"And what did you find out?"

"Well, I happen to know that my father had three favorite charities," Dillon said. "Before I left, he used to tell me that if I didn't 'shape-up,' as he put it, he would leave every cent of his money to those three institutions."

"He didn't, is that it?"

"Not exactly. According to the will, he left two hundred thousand dollars to each of two of them—the Cancer Society and the Children's Hospital. He also, according to the will, left three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the Association for Medical Research."

"All right," Sherrard said, "so what does that have to do with Chillingham?"

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"Everything," Dillon told him. "My father died of a heart attack—he'd had a heart condition for many years. Not severe, but he fully expected to die as a result of it one day. And so he did. And because of this heart condition his third favorite charity—the one he felt the most strongly about—was the Heart Fund."

"Go on," I said, frowning.

Dillon put out his cigarette and gave me a humorless smile. "I looked into the Association for Medical Research and I did quite a thorough bit of checking. It doesn't exist; there *isn't* any Association for Medical Research. And the only person who could have invented it is or was my father's lawyer and executor, Adam Chillingham."

Sherrard and I thought that over and came to the same conclusion. I said, "So even though you never got along with your father, and you don't care about money for yourself, you decided to expose Chillingham."

"That's right. My father worked hard all his life to build his fortune, and admirably enough he decided to give it to charity at his death. I believe in worthwhile causes, I believe in the work being done by the Heart Fund, and it sent me into a rage to realize they had been cheated out of a substantial fortune which could have gone toward valuable research."

"A murderous rage?" Sherrard asked softly.

Dillon showed us his humorless smile again. "I didn't kill Adam Chillingham," he said. "But you'll have to admit, he deserved killing—and that the world is better off without the likes of him."

I might have admitted that to myself, if Dillon's accusations were valid, but I didn't admit it to Dillon. I'm a cop, and my job is to uphold the law; murder is murder, whatever the reasons for it, and it can't be gotten away with.

Sherrard and I hammered at Dillon a while longer, but we couldn't shake him at all. I left Jack to continue the field questioning and took a couple of men and re-searched Chillingham's private office. No gun. I went up onto the roof of the nearest building and searched that personally. No gun. I took my men down into the lawn area and supervised another minute search. No gun.

I went back to Chillingham's suite and talked to Charles Hearn and Miss Tower again, and they had nothing to add to what they'd already told us; Hearn was "almost positive" he had heard a muffled explosion inside the office, but from the

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legal point of view that was the same as not having heard anything at all.

We took Dillon down to Headquarters finally, because we knew damned well he had killed Adam Chillingham, and advised him of his rights and printed him and booked him on suspicion. He asked for counsel, and we called a public defender for him, and then we grilled him again in earnest. It got us nowhere.

The F.B.I. and state check we ran on his fingerprints got us nowhere either; he wasn't wanted, he had never been arrested, he had never even been printed before. Unless something turned up soon in the way of evidence—specifically, the missing murder weapon—we knew we couldn't hold him very long.

The next day I received the lab report and the coroner's report and the ballistics report on the bullet taken from Chillingham's neck—.22 caliber, all right. The lab's and coroner's findings combined to tell me something I'd already guessed: the wound and the calculated angle of trajectory of the bullet did not entirely rule out the remote possibility that Chillingham had been shot from the roof of the nearest building. The ballistics report, however, told me something I hadn't guessed—something which surprised me a little.

The bullet had no rifling marks.

Sherrard blinked at this when I related the information to him. "No rifling marks?" he said. "Hell, that means the slug wasn't fired from a gun at all, at least not a lawfully manufactured one. A homemade weapon, you think, Walt?"

"That's how it figures," I agreed. "A kind of zip gun probably. Anybody can make one; all you need is a length of tubing or the like and a bullet and a grip of some sort and a detonating cap."

"But there was no zip gun, either, in or around Chillingham's office. We'd have found it if there was."

I worried my lower lip meditatively. "Well, you can make one of those zips from a dozen or more small component parts, you know; even the tubing could be soft aluminum, the kind you can break apart with your hands. When you're done using it, you can knock it down again into its components. Dillon had enough time to have done that, before opening the locked door."

"Sure," Sherrard said. "But then what? We *still* didn't find anything—not a single thing—that could have been used as part of a homemade zip."

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I suggested we go back and make another search, and so we drove once more to the Dawes Building. We re-combed Chillingham's private office—we'd had a police seal on it to make sure nothing could be disturbed—and we re-combed the surrounding area. We didn't find so much as an iron filing. Then we went to the city jail and had another talk with George Dillon.

When I told him our zipgun theory, I thought I saw a light flicker in his eyes; but it was the briefest of reactions, and I couldn't be sure. We told him it was highly unlikely a zipgun using a .22 caliber bullet could kill anybody from a distance of a hundred yards, and he said he couldn't help that, *he* didn't know anything about such a weapon. Further questioning got us nowhere.

And the following day we were forced to release him, with a warning not to leave the city.

But Sherrard and I continued to work doggedly on the case; it was one of those cases that preys on your mind constantly, keeps you from sleeping well at night, because you know there has to be an answer and you just can't figure out what it is. We ran checks into Chillingham's records and found that he had made some large private investments a year ago, right after the Dillon will had been probated. And as George Dillon had claimed, there was no Association for Medical Research; it was a dummy charity, apparently set up by Chillingham for the explicit purpose of stealing old man Dillon's $350,000. But there was no definite proof of this, not enough to have convinced Chillingham of theft in a court of law; he'd covered himself pretty neatly.

As an intelligent man, George Dillon had no doubt realized that a public exposure of Chillingham would have resulted in nothing more than adverse publicity and the slim possibility of disbarment—hardly sufficient punishment in Dillon's eyes. So he had decided on what to him was a morally justifiable homicide. From the law's point of view, however, it was nonetheless Murder One.

But the law still had no idea what he'd done with the weapon, and therefore, as in the case of Chillingham's theft, the law had no proof of guilt.

As I said, though, we had our teeth into this one and we weren't about to let go. So we paid another call on Dillon, this time at the hotel where he was staying, and asked him some questions about his background. There was nothing more immediate we could

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investigate, and we thought that maybe there was an angle in his past which would give us a clue toward solving the riddle.

He told us, readily enough, some of what he'd done during the 15 years since he'd left home, and it was a typical drifter's life: lobster packer in Maine, ranch hand in Montana, oil worker in Texas, road construction in South America. But there was a gap of about four years which he sort of skimmed over without saying anything specific. I jumped on that and asked him some direct questions, but he wouldn't talk about it.

His reluctance made Sherrard and me more than a little curious; we both had that cop's feeling it was important, that maybe it was the key we needed to unlock the mystery. Unobtrusively we had the department photographer take some pictures of Dillon; then we sent them out, along with a request for information as to his whereabouts during the four blank years, to various law enforcement agencies in Florida—where he'd admitted to being just prior to the gap, working as a deckhand on a Key West charter-fishing boat.

Time dragged on, and nothing turned up, and we were reluctantly forced by sheer volume of other work to abandon the Chillingham case; officially, it was now buried in the Unsolved File. Then, three months later, we had a wire from the Chief of Police of a town not far from Fort Lauderdale. It said they had tentatively identified George Dillon from the pictures we'd sent and were forwarding by airmail special delivery something which might conceivably prove the nature of Dillon's activities during at least part of the specified period.

Sherrard and I fidgeted around waiting for the special delivery to arrive, and when it finally came I happened to be the only one of us in the Squadroom. I tore the envelope open and what was inside was a multicolored and well-aged poster, with a picture of a man who was undeniably George Dillon depicted on it. I looked at the picture and read what was written on the poster at least a dozen times.

It told me a lot of things all right, that poster did. It told me exactly what Dillon had done with the homemade zipgun he had used to kill Adam Chillingham—an answer that was at once fantastic and yet so simple you'd never even consider it. And it told me there wasn't a damned thing we could do about it now, that we couldn't touch him, that

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George Dillon actually had committed a perfect murder.

I was brooding over this when Jack Sherrard returned to the Squadroom. He said, "Why so glum, Walt?"

"The special delivery from Florida finally showed up," I said, and watched instant excitement animate his face. Then I saw some of it fade while I told him what I'd been brooding about, finishing with, "We simply can't arrest him now, Jack. There's no evidence, it doesn't exist any more; we can't prove a thing. And maybe it's just as well in one respect, since I kind of liked Dillon and would have hated to see him convicted for killing a crook like Chillingham. Anyway, we'll be able to sleep nights now."

"Damn it, Walt, will you tell me what you're talking about!"

"All right. Remember when we got the ballistics report and we talked over how easy it would be for Dillon to have made a zipgun? And how he could make the whole thing out of a dozen or so small component parts, so that afterward he could break it down again into those small parts?"

"Sure, sure. But I still don't care if Dillon used a hundred components, we didn't find a single one of them. Not one. So what, if that's part of the answer, did he do with them? There's not even a connecting bathroom where he could have flushed them down. What did he do with the damned zipgun?"

I sighed and slid the poster—the old carnival sideshow poster—around on my desk so he could see Dillon's picture and read the words printed below it: STEAK AND POTATOES AND APPLE PIE IS OUR DISH; NUTS, BOLTS, PIECES OF WOOD, BITS OF METAL IS HIS! YOU HAVE TO SEE IT TO BELIEVE IT: THE AMAZING MR. GEORGE, THE MAN WITH THE CAST-IRON STOMACH.

Sherrard's head jerked up and he stared at me open-mouthed.

"That's right," I said wearily. "He *ate* it."

"Q"

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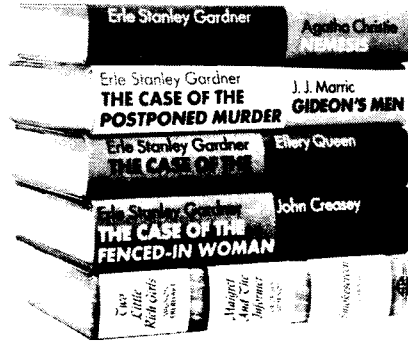

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